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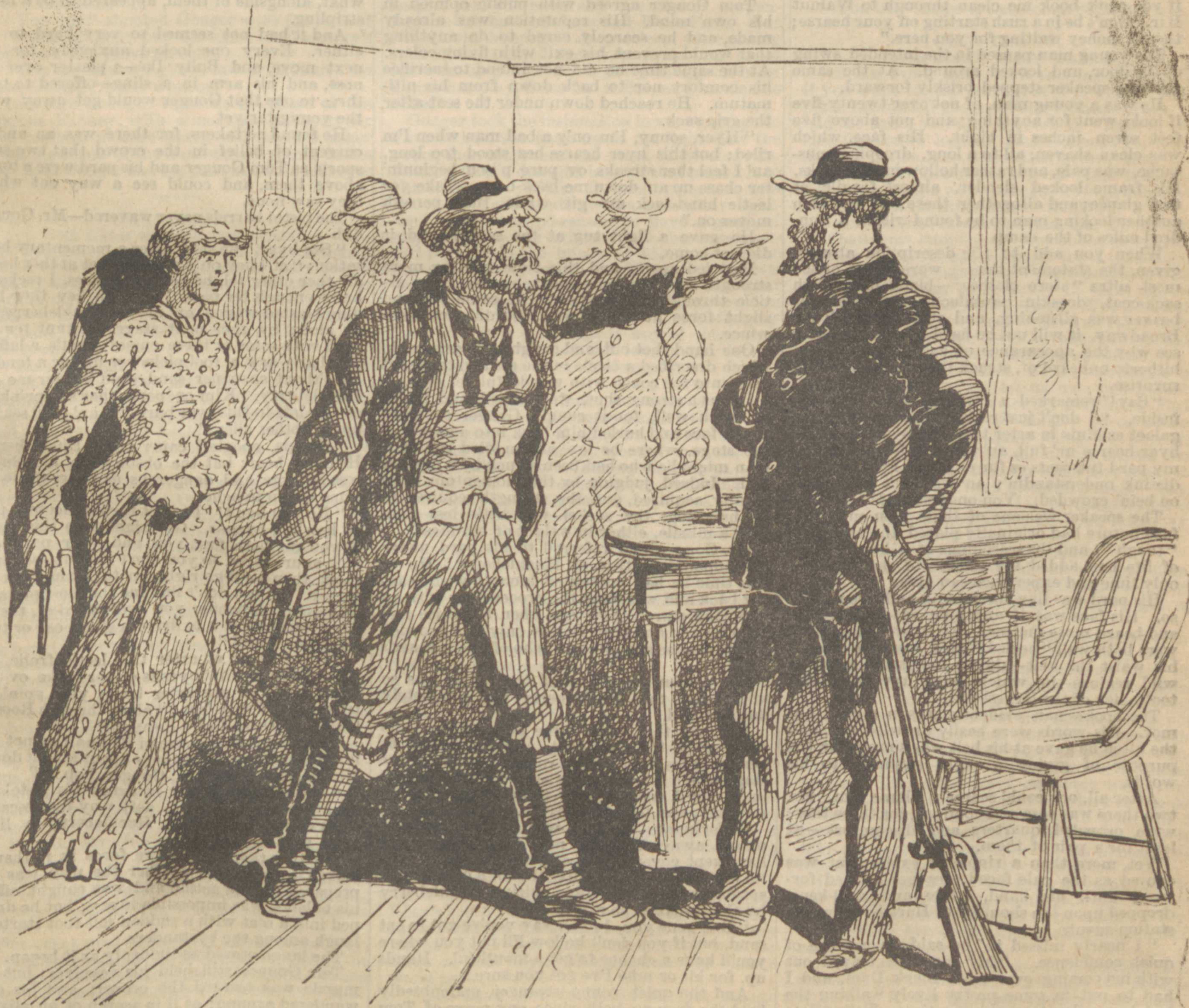
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CAPTAIN CUTSLEEVE; or, TOUCH-ME-NOT, THE LITTLE SPORT.

A ROMANCE OF GLORY GULCH.

BY WM. R. HYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "SOFT HAND SHARP," "HANDS UP," "DANDY DARKE," "FARO FRANK," ETC., ETC.



"WENT. CASE, OR CAPTAIN CUTSLEEVE AS YOU BE, YOU AR' A LIAR! LET 'EM TETCH THAT WOMAN EF THEY DAR'!"

Captain Cutsleeve;

OR,
TOUCH-ME-NOT,
THE LITTLE SPORT.

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CHAPTER I.

TOUCH-ME-NOT, THE DELICATE.

"ALL aboard for Glory Gulch, Rat Trap City, and points in Southwestern Arizona!"

The young man gave the regular professional shout, and looked around as if it was an everyday occurrence for a dozen or so of "pilgrims" to be left; but the fact of the case was that half-a-dozen passengers would have overloaded the rickety concern that bore the name of stage; and even that number had only been stowed away, under its canvas cover, but once in a month. That time Irish Jimmy and his load came most decidedly to grief, for just beyond Howling Flat the agents made a swoop, and meeting with some resistance Jimmy got a lead pill in his elbow, that laid him off for a fortnight or two, while old Peter Bunce, the well-known storekeeper of Rat Trap, was permanently retired from business. Since then the opposition line, over a longer but decidedly safer route, was the better patronized; though at best the travel was by no means heavy.

The young man retained, however, all of the style that he had carried in the days of their prosperity; and as it was neither money in nor out of his pocket, it made little difference. This morning he was just about to slam to the shakily door of the conveyance, upon its two passengers, who were already gracefully reclining in opposite corners and taking up the whole of the contracted accommodations, when, to the surprise of all parties concerned, two passengers presented themselves.

"Hold on a minute, sport," exclaimed a soft, clear voice. "Here's another man for the Gulch, if you can't book me clean through to Walnut B'r. Don't be in a rush starting off your hearse; there's money waiting for you here."

The young man paused in the intended swing of the door, and looked around. At the same time the speaker stepped briskly forward.

He was a young man, of not over twenty-five if looks went for anything; and not above five feet seven inches in height. His face, which was clean shaven, all to a long, drooping mustache, was pale, and rather hollow in the cheeks. His frame looked slender, almost fragile, at first glance; and altogether there was not such another looking man to be found within a hundred miles of the camp.

When you add to the description already given, the statement that he wore a suit of the most ultra "store clothes"—black broadcloth sack-coat, doeskin pantaloons—and that, his beaver was glistening, and stylish enough for Broadway, it will not be hard for the reader to see why the appearance of such a gentleman, hitherto unheard of, struck the bystanders with surprise.

"Say!" remarked a rasping voice from the inside. "I don't just reckon that's room for a galoot ez kims in arter ther deal's made. This hyar hearse ar' full, an' that's a fact. Me an' my pard tuk seats ez fur ez Plum Fork on that distink onderstandin'; an' we don't kalkerlate on bein' crowded. You onderstand?"

The speaker was one of those men on whose face nature had originally placed the stamp of "tough"; and the seasonings of a hard course of life had added the touches of shading that only time and experience can give.

His pard was like unto him—and even more so. His face was if anything redder, his hair and beard more matted. As to weapons, they were both well "heeled," each wearing around his waist the belt—almost inevitable in those wild regions—in which hung revolvers and tooth-pick of the largest size.

The spokesman evidently was in a good humor. His words were easily drawled out, and the hitch he gave at his belt was simply for the purpose of giving a slight emphasis to his words.

After all, one could scarcely blame him. For two there was ease and comfort; for three there were crowded quarters and discomfort—at least for a pair of them.

Yet, more than a ripple of excitement was caused as the pale faced stranger pushed forward until his hand, white and well-kept, dropped upon the shoulder of Hart Kinney, the station-agent.

"I nearly missed it," he said, in a voice of quiet confidence. "My mustang played out with me coming over from Black Dam, and I had to put in some pretty lively walking the last four miles, to make the time. Better late than never, though. Give me a show inside there."

As he spoke, in some adroit way he flung a small but heavy sachel through the door, and under the outstretched limbs of the brawny-looking rough who had already addressed him.

The tough was evidently astonished. He glared for an instant at the young man, his red face growing redder; and when once more he spoke, there was a snarl in his voice such as one hears when suddenly arousing a sleeping dog that is possessed of an uncertain temper.

"Say, young man, didn't yer h'ar me tell yer this concern war full? Me, an' my pard, Huckleberry, ar' hyar, an' we fill ther bill. Ef thar's any crowdin', thar'll be blood an' ha'r by ther bucketful."

There was a look of some concern on Hart Kinney's face as he turned to the would-be passenger.

"For heaven's sake, mister, go slow—go most durned slow—anyhow, till I git out of range. That's Tom Gouger, the dead-shot from Shasta, and the worst man that ever struck this town. He and his pard held the street last night, and got away with Bully Ike and his gang. You wouldn't be a mouthful. Just you take a back seat till a team comes in, and hanged if I don't send you over special; but don't give him any chance to take you in now. Come on. We'll go in and take a drink and let Jimmy start without you."

There was a tone of kindly commiseration in Hart Kinney's voice that spoke volumes for his goodness of heart, but it had no effect on the little man in store clothes.

"This is a public conveyance," he said, "and as far as I can see, there's room for a couple more. I've no time to wait for specials—when I go I'm in a hurry—and as my baggage is on board I shall follow my baggage. I haven't had much experience in life; but as far as I know I don't scare worth a cent."

No sign of trepidation did the young man show, but if sound went for anything, there was a world of guileless innocence in his voice that led the spectators to believe that he knew but little of Arizona ways and means or the class of men of whom he was speaking, and they looked at him curiously, as a lamb about to be slaughtered. No sign of a weapon did he have about him, and it was a question whether he knew the meaning of "getting the drop."

Tom Gouger agreed with public opinion in his own mind. His reputation was already made, and he scarcely cared to do anything that would prevent his exit with flying colors. At the same time he did not intend to sacrifice his comfort nor to back down from his ultimatum. He reached down under the seat after the grip-sack.

"Hyar, sonny, I'm on'y a bad man when I'm riled; but this hyer hearse bez stood too long, an' I feel ther streaks ov pure p'ison beginnin' ter chase up an' down me back-bone. Take yer leetle hand-sack an' git while ther persesh moves on."

He gave a light tug at the sachel—and it did not come.

He tried again, and this time, putting more strength into the movement, he tossed the article through the doorway. It came with no slight force at its owner, who did not even wince.

One hand shot out and caught the grip-sack, which described a circle in the air and then shot back into the coach with wonderful velocity.

It was a strong shot, well aimed, and it did its work well, for it caught Gouger squarely in the face and hurled him back into a corner of the stage, where he lay all huddled up, as a man might lie who had been struck by a cannon ball. Indeed, judging by the momentum it so readily acquired, and the strength required in its handling, the sachel was little less than such a missile, either in weight or hardness.

Mr. Gouger had referred to his pard under the euphonious title of Huckleberry. Up to this time he had contented himself with leaning back and watching the proceedings with an admiring stare. Now and then his voice had been heard; and then it was only in a growled assent that seemed like an echo of the speaker's words.

The sudden upsetting of the tables was so unexpected that Huckleberry was completely dumfounded.

It is true that, from force of habit his hand dropped to his pistol-belt, and he sprang as nearly to his feet as the rather low top of the stage would allow; but he stared for an instant in a dazed sort of way from Gouger to the stranger, and then back again.

Unfortunate for him was it that his eyes passed away from the man that they should have kept covered, for, at that instant, the little man, with a bound, like that of a catamount, sprang inside of the stage, seizing Huckleberry by the throat as he came.

"Dog-gone you, I don't say you've got to eat sand, but if you don't hollow I'll put you where you'll have a chance to get a mouthful. Hands up, for hit or miss I've got you sure."

And the quiet young stranger undoubtedly held the drop on both, since any move of Tom Gouger could only result in the destruction of his pard.

CHAPTER II.

THE FOURTH PASSENGER.

GOUGER was only inactive for a few seconds; but that was long enough for a great deal of mischief to be done. When he recovered sufficiently to know what was going on; Huckleberry was in trouble; and as his broad shoulders were between the man from Shasta and the stranger it was not so easy to see just what was to pay.

But instinct—or Huckleberry's inaction—was sufficient; and without hesitation Tom Gouger rolled out of the opposite side of the stage. As his feet struck the ground he drew a revolver; and now, red-hot with anger, he fairly howled: "Jump fur it, Huckleberry; I'm goin' ter put that 'ere hearse fuller ov holes ner a skimmer."

"Don't you do it," hissed the stranger, in a low, compressed whisper. "It's a self-cocker, and the hammer is 'ready raised. A fraction of a hair's breadth further and it'll be too late for prayers. When I feel you stir I'll let go."

A gurgle issued from the mouth of the man in such deadly danger, but the steel tube between his teeth prevented anything like an articulate sound.

"Ar' yer comin', Huckleberry? I tell yer I'm jist a-b'ilin' over, an' I won't give much more warnin' afore I let drive."

"Exactly, my little terror; but what will I be doing? Put up that pop-gun and get in; we can't be fooling here all day. It's time this hearse was on the go—and go it must, if I leave the butt end of a funeral behind. I have you lined."

When Huckleberry had realized that the drop was on him, he had obeyed the order of *hands up* without hesitation. Now, from under one of his arms, there appeared the shining barrel of a self-cocking revolver that lay right in line for Tom Gouger's head.

He saw it quickly enough; and as he looked, the hammer began to raise. No nonsense about this stranger or his tools. If he chose, it was the Comstock lode to a sardine can that he took in both of the pards.

About half the town was there by this time, and gleefully did they recognize this fact, for a regular shout went up.

The two toughs had held the camp the night before; and here they were, caught in hock by what, alongside of them, appeared to be a mere stripling.

And it had not seemed so very hard to do, either. Every one looked anxiously for the next move, and Bully Ike—a plaster over his nose, and his arm in a sling—offered to take three to one that Gouger would get away with the youngster yet.

He found no takers, for there was an undercurrent of belief in the crowd that two such sports as Tom Gouger and his pard were a touch above them, and could see a way out where they saw none.

The pistol barrels never wavered—Mr. Gouger did.

"See hyar," he said, after a momentary hesitation; "ef I hev on'y a seven-shot at ther head, an' ther other fel. he holds four aces, I reckon I know enough ter pass. You kin hev ther bull ding blasted wagon, an' me an' Huckleberry kin go along by ther next stage. I want ter git even with some er these cusses what's a-laffin'. Ef thar's ary a fool picks yer up fur a tender-huf, 'thout snap ner sand, send 'em ter re an' Huckleberry. Kim on, pard; thar's a sprinklin' ov fun left in this hyar burg yit, an' we'll set 'em up on t'other alley."

"Gurgle, gurgle!" came from Huckleberry. He could hear; but the obstacle in his throat was as large and dangerous as ever, while his arms began to ache.

"No you don't! I'm not turning loose a pair of howling hyenas. Get right into this stage; as you got here first you and your pard can pick your places, so you don't take up too much room, then we'll go right on to Plum Fork together. If you don't find me the most pleasant traveling-companion you ever heard of, then I don't know enough to drive a street-car or turn a fortune-wheel."

"D'yer mean et arter this leetle frolic, jist when them howlin' hyenas ez yer spoke ov bez smelt blood an' are arter bones ye'r goin' ter trust yerself with 'em all alone through Rooster Gulch an' Dead Man's Canyon?"

"That's about the size of it; and I'm not going to have any skittishness about it. Sit down, Huckleberry; and you, Gouger, hop in."

As he spoke he coolly returned his pistols to his hip pockets in some deft way that escaped observation, and gave Huckleberry a little push, as it seemed.

Whether there was more force in it than it looked to have, or whether the man was unprepared for the action and was caught off of his balance was impossible to say; but he dropped into a seat with a sudden jolt that started a laugh among the bystanders.

The laugh ceased as suddenly as it began. Tom Gouger still held his revolver; but the muzzle was toward the crowd; and his eyes wandered around; as if in search of an eligible man to plant.

"I wa'n't a-keerin' fur meself, yer durned

gerloot; but when I saw I couldn't move without sendin' Huckleberry outen ther wet, I caved. I couldn't go back on him. But ef thar's ary a one-hoss keard-flipper, er second-hand shuter ez thinks he ar' ez good er man ez I be, hyar's ther chance ter draw an' plug."

As he spoke Gouger gave a step forward—and the crowd gave two backward. After all the redoubtable tough was still a chief, so far as that camp went.

He saw it with a grin, that showed his good-humor was somewhat restored; and then turned toward the young man who was now seated fronting Huckleberry, and watching the proceedings with a serious face.

"I say, pard, I guess we kin travel together ez fur ez Plum Fork; but afore I git in 'pose yer sling us out yer handle. I wouldn't like ter leave hyar without givin' them bandy-legged monkeys er chance ter know ther on'y man ez ever got the the drop, fa'r an' squar', on ther morberific death-shot ez hails frum Shasta."

"One man is as good as another in this heaven-forsaken country; and I generally get along well enough without any at all; though some of my friends have named me 'Touch-Me-Not,' some adding, 'the Delicate.' If you notice I always hold the drop."

Gouger turned quie ly to mount to his place, when the rasping voice of Bully Ike arose from the crowd.

"Three ter one thet ther hearse takes one stiff inter Plum Fork, an' five ter one thar's two!"

"My friend, if you don't dry up the funeral will be over before we start, and you know it would be a shame to delay the coach for such innocent but useless diversions."

Touch-Me-Not spoke with a thoroughly indolent air, but there was no mistaking the fact that he meant business.

It is possible that issue might have been joined had not Hart Kinney, the young agent, at this moment, with somewhat re-established courage, advanced, just as Irish Jimmy, who had thrown down his break, tossed the lines on the backs of his horses and sought semi-shelter behind a post, came crawling back to his perch.

"Excuse me, gentlemen; but as you seem to have settled it all quite peaceably among yourselves, could you not find room for another passenger? I wouldn't crowd you for a dollar, but if you *could* make room it would be a great accommodation."

"You git!" shouted Gouger with the roar of a famishing lion; but for once Huckleberry's voice failed to prove an echo.

"'Pon me soul ter glory, he's er kaliker. Go slow, Gouger; it's er woman!"

And sure enough, right at the elbow of the anxious Kinney, with a nervous smile on her face and half a dozen boxes and bundles in her arms, stood one of the handsomest young ladies that Tom Gouger and his pard had ever laid eyes on.

CHAPTER III.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM.

If the fourth passenger had been a burly miner, or even a slim, toothless old harridan, it is likely that that stage might have proved to be fully occupied.

But a passenger like this was a different affair, and the three vied with each other in the politeness.

"Room?" said Gouger. "Why, ef thar warn't room hyar fur jist three dozen sich passengers I sh'u'd rally shout. Pile 'em in three deep, an' me an' Huckleberry kin hang on behind. Ef this hyar leetle sport don't like it, dog twist my boots ef that there cirkiss don't start over ag'in."

Touch-Me-Not, however, was not the man that was likely to object. On the contrary, before Gouger was done speaking, he was on the ground, and Huckleberry's hoarse echo was lost on the ears that were listening to more dulcet tones.

"Room, miss? Why this conveyance is not half-full. Allow me."

With the air of an expert he disburdened her of her luggage and aided her into the stage, taking her right out of the hands of the willing but hesitating Kinney.

"Everything here all right, miss? Yes. Well, then, Jimmy, crack your whip."

Irish Jimmy waited no longer. He had been wishing for the last five minutes that he had originally used a little more expedition, and now, without waiting for any further complications, he astonished the mild and meager-looking steeds by a vigorous application of the lash.

The crowd behind gave a cheer, the stage rolled away, and the illy-assorted cargo was off on the way for Glory Gulch and intermediate points.

The young lady was on the back seat, by the side of Huckleberry, and immediately facing her was Touch-Me-Not, who had Gouger on his left.

Now that everything was fairly under way, Gouger was inclined to be sociable; though he kept his eyes sedulously away from the young lady, who, on her side, now had her face well-hidden by a veil.

"Thar's yer grip-sack, mister," Gouger remarked, without the least sign of malice. "I

no-notice thet it's all-fired heavy fur its looks—what mout ther' be in it?"

"Bullion, nuggets, coin, and a few diamonds," answered Touch-Me-Not, carelessly.

"I know thar mout be; but that ain't eggskactly what I meant."

"I never mean more than I say; and I'm not much given to poking fun at fellow-travelers. Here's the inside, and I guess you can tell whether there's any sham about it."

He stooped down, and thrusting open a couple of catches drew apart the jaws of the hand-sack.

"Heft those, and take a look. If you're a judge of such things it will do you good."

Mr. Gouger gave an exclamation of surprise. He had thought he had been answered by a very stale joke, yet they fell very far short of conveying an idea of the actual truth, since the sachel that had been so freely bandied about appeared to be a perfect mine of wealth. The bullion and coin were the smallest part of the wealth disclosed; and it was not hard now to see where the apparently harmless object got its real weight.

"Thunder an' blazes, pard, yer must be old Flood kisser—ef yer ain't a dook in disguise. I kinder dropped to yer noble azpekt an' lordly brow—me an' Huckleberry did. I tell yer, we'd 'a' bin weepin' tears ov sorer ef we'd taken yer in outer ther wet by way ov ary mistake. But yer see what good judgement an' a fair temper doz. I won't ax yer ter shake; but hyar's somethin' better. It's ther rale moutin dew, nothin' like it from hyar ter Frisco. Sample that."

He produced a plebeian looking, flat, black bottle from his breast pocket, and having given it a shake that elicited the sound of a gentle flash, he handed it to Touch-Me-Not, who held it for an instant doubtfully in his hand and then, with a sigh, raised it to his lips.

When it did not at once drop Gouger gave the gurgle that passed with him for a laugh.

"Somethin' like yer grip-sack. Er heap sight more inside than ther looks ter be. Eh, I'm on the squar', me an' Huckleberry be, er I'd never axed yer ter sample that. I've got er jug ov ord'nary stuff that's good enuf fur ary such gerloots ez Bully Ike, an' ther like."

"Very fair it is, Mr. Gouger, and one can't suspect the good intentions of a gentleman that comes at him with such good tippie, so I hardly suspect that you have any intention of reopening the ball between here and Plum Fork. But if I should happen to drop asleep, after taking such a long pull, I wouldn't advise you to let me wake up at all. I'm slightly dangerous after a man has played me fer a flat, and made the rifle."

Gouger took the insinuation in very good part. First he held the flask up to the light that the young man might see the state of its contents. Then he took a draught himself and passed it to Huckleberry. When it was returned into Touch-Me-Not's hands it was so sensibly lightened that he had no reason to have a grain of suspicion. It was evident that there was settled purpose in the minds of the three men to jog on amicably together. Whether the presence of beauty had anything to do with that was a question that remained to be answered in the future. They conversed in a friendly way for some little time, and if any of them ever turned an eye toward the fourth and female passenger it was in a sidelong, furtive sort of way.

In about half an hour, however, the young lady seemed to regain some confidence—considering the condition of affairs when she first essayed the stage it is no wonder that she had feared trouble with or among these men. She drew up her veil once more, disclosing the fresh, handsome face, that had so struck the half-harmonized belligerents.

Touch-Me-Not was the first to note and take advantage of this.

"Going far, miss?" he said, in a quiet, matter-of-fact way.

"To Glory Gulch, wherever that may be. I am going to join my father there—Colonel Canley—Colonel James Canley. He is interested in mining matters there, and wrote to me at Sacramento to come on."

"Indeed! You have had rather a long jaunt, and a tiresome one. I wonder he was willing to have you undertake such a journey alone. It was dangerous, too."

"Oh, he never dreamed of my coming alone. Major De Mille and his wife took charge of me, and I expected to have their company all the way through. Unfortunately he was overtaken by a special messenger, who had orders for him to go back. Then I made up my mind that as I had started, and father was expecting me, I would come through."

"That was a brave resolve."

"It tried my courage to make it; but indeed I have had no trouble, and met with no adventures. Except for matters connected with my journey I have not spoken to a living soul for three or four days. The lonesomeness was the worst part of it."

"You have been fortunate so far; though the worst, but fortunately the shortest portion of the road is before you."

"I am sorry to hear you say so; though I un-

derstood as much from what I had been told. I do not see how this miserable team and conveyance can be expected to get over the interminably bad roads between here and the Gulch."

"As far as that is concerned you might rest easy. Irish Jimmy, the driver, has power in his elbow, and a whip for business and not for show. I allude to other dangers. Fortunately it is so near your journey's end that it does not make much difference. Otherwise it might happen that you would be stranded high and dry, without friends, and a long way from home."

"I am afraid I do not altogether understand you yet."

"I am sorry if it will give you any uneasiness, but almost anywhere between here and Glory Gulch we are liable to meet the Cutsleeves—the gang of the noted road-agent, Captain Cutsleeve. I understand they are very thorough in their work."

"It is classical to say that the empty-handed traveler can sing in the presence of the robber. I am afraid Captain Cutsleeve would soon become disgusted with his business if all pockets were like mine."

"He is almost so now, I should judge. An exploit of his some weeks ago went so far toward scaring people off of this route that, if they told the truth over at Black Dam, this is the largest load this conveyance has hauled since the affair."

"But, surely, you do not anticipate any trouble to-day? You could hardly afford to run any great risks."

"In this country fingers are free, and every man must take his chances, Miss Canley. By the way, if it is not an impertinence, I should like to ask you for your full name!"

"Ellen, sir; Ellen Canley. You seem to be a stranger here, so I need not ask you if you know anything of my father. Perhaps one of these other gentlemen has heard of or met him lately."

The young lady turned very sweetly toward Huckleberry as she spoke, but he was by far too dumfounded at the direct address to answer.

"Can't say that we hev," interposed Gouger.

"But thet don't make any differens. Es fur on ther road es Plum Fort you kin add it up that no road-agents ain't a-goin' ter bother you. We kin jist lick er reegerment ov road-agents cut an' out. Can't we, Huckleberry?"

"You bet!" came the customary chorus.

CHAPTER IV.

IRISH JIMMY TAKES WATER.

"PLUM FORK must be a rattling little buig if you want to stop there, but if I was in your place I think I'd go on to Glory Gulch. They've had the finds, there, of the season. That is the spot fur you to locate. Men of means go there, and I notice, in what I've heard, that the agents don't bother much with folks that are not going all the way through. The trouble always begins the other side of the Fork."

From his tone it was possible that Touch-Me-Not had some latent suspicions of the two pards. Indeed it would not be hard for a passenger who got off at Plum Fork, if there provided with a good mustang, to reappear in front of the coach half way to Glory Gulch. Yet if he had suspected them, why had he been so careless in showing the portable wealth, that was enough to make even an honest man's eyes water?

"That's so, leetle pard. Ef they do strike in it'll ketch you sure, an' let us out; but I don't see how ter fix it unless yer lay over at the Fork one trip an' let the bit ov kaliker go on alone. It wouldn't be ther squar' thing ter have er frolic with ther irons an' she in ther hearse. On course yer wouldn't hold up when they shouted; an' when they talk they do mean bizness. Say. Ef you'll lay off er stage I'll be dingblasted ef me an' Huckleberry don't go 'long with yer; an' we'll try 'em er hitch."

"You bet," added Huckleberry.

"I can't do it," answered the younger man, positively. "If it was at Glory Gulch I wouldn't so much mind making a stay; but I've got no business at the Fork."

Probably the delights of Mr. Gouger's company were not equal to the benefits suggested.

"Don't make any change in your plans on my account, gentlemen," here interposed Miss Canley. "It is generally the luck of those who shirk danger to run right into it, and I am not inclined to believe that one can escape their fate so easily as by stopping over a stage, or going on with a crowd. My father was a soldier once and I hope he has a daughter worthy of him. At all events I should not shirk my share of what danger might happen to you; and I have an idea that perhaps I would be able to take my part in a resistance. I am armed, you see, and can shoot tolerably straight."

In no boastful tone did the girl speak, but in one of solid, everyday courage. She drew a shining little revolver from some hidden receptacle about her dress, and looked determined rather than desperate.

"Very well. We will see how matters look when we get to the Fork. Perhaps the trouble will come sooner than we expect it, anyhow."

This seemed to exhaust the stock of conversation suitable for use in the presence of a lady, and though there was some talk in a desultory

sort of way, the four passengers seemed more inclined to occupy themselves with their own thoughts. As they neared Plum Fork, Gouger and Huckleberry were sound asleep—probably somewhat exhausted with their efforts of the previous night. Miss Canley was leafing over a well-thumbed magazine, while Touch-Me-Not stared fixedly out of the coach at the flitting landscape.

The vehicle entered the straggling camp with something of a rush, since just at the outskirts the driver used his elbow power vigorously. The passengers woke up, the town was aroused, and altogether things were quite lively.

At Plum Fork such of the passengers as desired could procure dinner, for which a halt of some little time was made; but the accommodations were none of the best, and it required the appetite given by fresh mountain air to enable one—if possessed of anything like a fastidious stomach—to worry through the rough bill of fare set out at the Miner's Rest.

As it was the only chance until Glory Gulch was reached, Miss Canley improved the opportunity to the best of her ability, though she was ready to take her seat long before Irish Jimmy shouted "All aboard!"

"Yer a-goin', are ye, pard?" exclaimed Gouger, as he saw Touch-Me-Not following Miss Canley into the conveyance. "So long, then. But I sw'ar I'd liked ter shown yer round ter-night. Ef yer wait 'round ther Gulch fur a day er so yer'll see me an' Huckleberry thar, an' then we'll jest make things git up an' snort!"

Gouger waved his hand, and as the coach pulled away, Touch-Me-Not could see Lim, followed by his echo, hastening up the street. The little man looked after the two with a singular smile, and when he turned hastily around he could see that the young lady had been watching him, with considerable curiosity.

"You have your idea about those men?" she remarked. "They seemed to have become wonderfully friendly after you had got the better of them in argument. Do you suppose that they will try to have their revenge?"

"Hardly. The only question is whether they are worse men than they look. I set them down as two of a class that has its representatives scattered all through this region. They are ready with knife, pistol or fist, are really experts in their use, and inclined to fight at the drop of the hat, and yet not as full of malice as one would suppose. When they meet their master, they fall into their place naturally enough. I would trust them now further than I would some quieter men. Yet I may be wrong."

"But do you think there is the danger from road-agents that they seemed to think; or were they trying to test our courage?"

"They were honest enough in what they said—always providing they are not of the gang. I am a new man in these regions, and not posted as I was in Northern California. There, it was hard to name a man who was supposed to carry any sand, that I had not heard of. But Gouger of Shasta is ahead of me. And I know that region like a book."

"If they are of the agents, they know very well what this cargo is worth, and you will be apt to see them again."

"No, they would only post the rest of the gang. They would not run the risk of recognition unless they positively meant to kill. It is daylight business; for we reach the Gulch an hour or two before sundown and the work is all done between here and there. I am a little surprised that your father was not around to see you over this last thirty miles. Still, of course, he could not tell when you would come exactly, and supposed that the major would be with you. I notice that they are a little chary of attacking military gentlemen."

"But one would think that these outlaws would be afraid of interruption. There are so many camps scattered on this trail. Why, it is really a populous country."

"That's just it. It's populous in spots—and the rest is a howling wilderness. Wait a bit. You have the really rough part of the trip to make after you pass the next settlement, that is only a few miles ahead."

The young man spoke the truth, as Miss Canley admitted an hour or two later, when they plunged into the sinuous trail that wound through the mountains in the direction of Glory Gulch. All around was loneliness, silence and desolation.

The gloomy nature of her surroundings cast a shadow over the face of the fair girl. Irish Jimmy whistled more softly when he laid the lash over his team, and Touch-Me-Not himself was more silent than usual.

"Av they're comin' they'll be afther showin' the'rselves behind yander bend. Sure it war thar they mounted us when they took Pater Bunce, glory be wid his sowl, outen ther wet. Av yer a lad av sinse yez will howld up ther first shout, an' not be bringin' ther young leddy inter a wurruld av thrubble."

"Thank you, Jimmy, for the advice—a singed cat shies the fire, but I'm not that kind. I should be sorry to bring either of you into a difficulty, but I can't afford it nohow."

"Then, begorra, yez will be afther drivin' through yersilf. Thar's a tingling in me crazy bone yit, an' ther chafe av ther gang sed ther next toime he'd take ther top av me skull. I'll walk behindt, an' take ther ribbons ag'in when ther frolic's over. I like a ruction az will az ther nixt mon, but by ther powers it's wid a shtick I'd sooner have it."

The earnestness of the little Irishman was greeted with a hearty laugh; for, really, it was amusing to see the trepidation he manifested as he gazed at the spot indicated, which was only about a quarter of a mile ahead.

"Beggorra, it's laugh yez will in the other corner av yer mouth. It's did 'arnist I wor in, so Mr. Touch-Me-Not jist ketch hould av ther ribbins."

The driver came to a full stop. It was pretty evident that he thought that his passengers would show fight, and that he had made up his mind if there were any bullets flying he was not going to be in range.

"An' troth an' it's a pity that an illegant young leddy loik yersilf should be cut down in ther flower av yer youth. Take Jimmy Keene's advice, miss, an' foot it fur a moile, lettin' this hot-headed spalpeen go on alone! Sure av any thing tounes up we kin foot it back ter Rat Trap an' sind out an excoorshun."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the object of his solicitude. "I never turned back yet, and I don't think I'll begin now. Give me the reins, if you please, and we'll give you a chance to stretch your limbs for as many miles as you want to."

"Is it thrust yez wid the tame that yez thinks I'd be afther doin'? Glory to ther saints, but it's gone mad yez are ontoirely. Come now, both av yez, lit's argy ther mather."

"Either drive on or get off," said Touch-Me-Not sternly.

"Thin off it are. I hear thim coomin' now."

And giving a turn of the lines around the brake the driver actually sprung down, and stood by the roadside, half-ashamed and half-defiant.

If he thought Miss Ellen was only jesting he was very much mistaken. Before he could decide what other course to take to induce his passengers to be robbed peaceably she had changed her seat, gathered up the lines, cracked the whip and was off.

CHAPTER V.

HALT!

It always remained an open question with Miss Ellen Canley whether she assumed the ribbons in a spirit of bravado, without any intention of carrying out her proposal; or whether she expected to go clear through. It was also a mystery to her whether she really supposed that there was any actual danger, or whether she believed that Irish Jimmy was trying to play off one of his tricks upon travelers.

At any rate, as she brought the whip down vigorously the horses, sprung away with a frightened bound, and plunged forward the not distant bend in the road, beyond which the agents were supposed to be lurking. Behind her rose the driver's cry to "shtop! shtop!" but she could not have minded if she had cared to, and dashed on with accelerated speed, while the remaining passenger leaned back in his seat, with a smile of contentment on his thin lips.

At all events there had been a gain in speed by the exchange of drivers.

The bend was reached, the wall of the canyon turned, and another straight bit of road lay before them.

No signs of road-agents yet.

Then, suddenly they heard the clatter of horse's hoofs behind them, while in front as if by magic, appeared half a dozen masked men, each of whom handled a carbine.

"Halt, ther! Hands up!"

It was the customary, legendary hail, given in that sharp, penetrating tone that means business.

It was a surprise; and yet without the benefits of a surprise. Across the road, some half-dozen yards away had been felled a tree, as though in anticipation of Irish Jimmy's attempting to duplicate his effort at rushing through. It made a fair barricade, and behind it stood the road-agents—or at least the half-dozen of them who were at once visible. It seemed very like as though the stage was in a trap.

Yet, once more Miss Ellen swung down her lash in a drawing cut, and the horses bounded forward like frightened deer, while their driver held them straight for the fallen trunk.

And mingled with the crack of the whip came the report of Touch-Me-Not's pistols.

Two snap-shots had been taken before there was a tearing crash. The horses, breasting the tree, had brought the vehicle so nearly over it that it hung balanced, as it were, by the reach-pole, the front wheels on one side and the hind wheels on the other side of the barricade.

Two men had already gone down under the sudden defense; and now the ball opened again. If the stage was a fair mark to riddle with bullets, the trunk of the tree could no longer be used as a breastwork, since the coach now commanded either side, the agents being in full view from the windows.

One unavailing volley had been sent from

their carbines, and Touch-Me-Not's revolvers were making havoc in their ranks, when a carbine-barrel was thrust into the vehicle from behind, the muzzle of which was pressed firmly against his left ear, while a deep, coarse voice growled out:

"Hands up, old coon. It's a pity ter slaughter a game man like you be; but I hez ther dead medicine on yer, sure."

A man who had been concealed in a niche in the canyon wall had recklessly sprung up behind, at the risk of receiving a bullet from the outlaws in front, and had taken the drop on the young sharp in a most unmistakably certain way.

Touch-Me-Not felt the ring of cold steel, and knew that he was covered, yet he never lost his coolness.

"I never put my hands up unless I raise a pair of sixes with them. If you've got any use for a corpse of about my size, blaze away."

His pistols were still in his hands, that were yet outstretched; but he ceased to crook his fingers. Though he had two of the hand covered, he was not quite reckless enough for that.

"Hold hard thar, boyees!" continued the man who held the drop. "I have him foul. A couple of you come forward and take his irons from him—I reckon he'll wilt now. Then just histe out ther shemal cattymount in petty-coats, ez acts ez though she'd sooner fight nor eat. Thar's coin in this chariot, er I don't know beans."

"Hold him level, captain," was the answer, as two men stepped promptly forward. "He shoots almighty straight, he does. Thar's four men gone ter pot a'ready."

Although it was true that four men had dropped dead or wounded under Touch-Me-Not's fire, yet, as if by some strange magic, the depleted ranks were not only full again, but overflowing. The canyon seemed alive with masked men, of whom there were not less than half a score.

"Hangin's too good fur sich a gerloot ez would mow down feller-critters like ez 'bough they war grasshoppers, jist ter save a little pewter. It beats hoss-stealin'. Hyar's a rope an' thar's a limb. Now's ther time fur jedge, jury, and ther law. He ort ter be swung thar ez an orful warnin'."

So growled one of the two men as he advanced; but the other outlaw cast a sudden, wary glance at Miss Canley, and then threw up his carbine.

There were two reports, one a shade after the other, and two bodies dropped—the one in a huddled-up mass in the front of the stage, the other falling prone in the road, with a sullen sort of a "chug." Miss Ellen had taken a sudden shot at the man whose head she could just see over Touch-Me-Not's shoulder, and one of the road-agents, a trifle late, had tried a snap-shot at her.

At this reopening of the fusillade, the horses, which had quieted down in the helplessness of despair, suddenly renewed their struggles.

Then there was a settling of the tree, a jolt as though iron and timbers must part, and just as the road-agents, disgusted at the charmed life which Touch-Me-Not seemed to bear, flung themselves in a body at the coach, the vehicle crashed over the obstruction, the driverless steeds dashing madly down the slight incline that lay before them.

After all, it was more luck than judgment, for senseless in the bottom of the conveyance lay the two passengers, while, after a few scattering shots, the mass of the outlaws stood grouped around their fallen leader.

When Irish Jimmy crept cautiously to the jutting edge of the canyon wall and peeped around at the scene of the action, he could hear the distant rattle of wheels, and could see a masked man staggering to his feet in the middle of the road.

"Halt thar!" exclaimed this man. "By ther eternal! a man that kin git erway with a gang like this orter live. I'll drop meself ther first hound ez moves foot in pursuit. Next time shoot straighter, er not at all."

But though the gang halted for the present, there was not one there who did not believe that that "next time" would come very soon. There was a law with them that said "a life for a life," and they never forgot it.

CHAPTER VI.

A LITTLE MAN ON HIS MUSCLE.

THE coach had practically no particular time for reaching Glory Gulch, and it usually came crawling in anywhere between sundown and midnight, sometimes the trip being intermittent altogether. The vehicle, which was like to none other seen in that region, was perfectly familiar to the population of that thriving town.

It was not viewed with any favor either, since its shabbiness and irregularity were rather held as a disgrace to what one and all considered would be the metropolis of Arizona at no very distant day. Indeed, the population had increased at a wonderful rate, for there was a "rush" toward that section of the Territory, and the Gulch received her share of it. There were some men of capital; a good many of brawny muscles, honest, hard-working miners;

and of course the usual assortment of dare-devils, roughs and sporting men, who are continually moving on toward and to the newest finds.

A large detachment of this latter sort had gathered around "The Blizzard" saloon, discussing a matter of interest to the clan, when the loafers were almost struck dumb at seeing the stage that took the Rat-Trap road come dashing into town a full hour before sunset.

As the vehicle drew up at John Goodman's—the stage stopped right across the way from The Blizzard, and that was where the old concern had the advantage, because Goodman kept the only place in town that amounted to anything as a hotel—the loungers could see that the man who held the ribbons was a perfect stranger to them, and that he did not look at all like a stage-driver. He was a natty little fellow, brisk in his movements, and a white hankerchief was tightly knotted over his forehead and around his head.

This young man tossed the lines over the horses' backs with an air of reckless abandon, sprang to the ground, and proceeded to help a young lady to alight.

"Ther agents hez held 'em up, an' Irish Jimmy hez got his gruel."

The exclamation of Mustang Ben was greeted with an assent all around. An inspection from a nearer coigne of vantage showed a dozen or more suspicious marks, that the connoisseurs had no difficulty in pronouncing the work of bullets, and there seemed to be no question but what the gentleman and lady had both been barked.

The facts in the case, so readily imagined, produced a strong current of public opinion favorable to the young stranger, and an admiring throng appeared with magic suddenness at his elbow.

"Did they git away with yer baggage?"

"Have you planted Jimmy, or what has become of his stiff?"

"Wharabouts did they strike yer?"

These, and a dozen other questions, were anxiously asked, though without any present answer. Touch-Me-Not turned sharply to the nearest man.

"Do you happen to know one Colonel Jim Canley? If you do, you just rack off and tell him that his daughter is here, with a carbine bullet through her shoulder, but nothing serious."

With his message he carelessly tossed out a five dollar gold piece; and by chance both hit the right man. The recipient was posted.

"Canley lives t'other end of the gulch; but I just ain't certain that he's at home. I'll run down that way and see. Ef he axes who sent me what shell I tell him is ther shape of yer handle?"

"One name is as good as another—and he wouldn't know any of them. Skip! He'll find us here."

This much Touch-Me-Not said before supporting the somewhat limp figure of Ellen into the house.

After all, the young lady had not been seriously harmed, although she had lain for some time in a deathlike swoon. When she came out of that she found that the vehicle had come to a halt, and that Touch-Me-Not was bathing her brow. He had already bandaged her shoulder and his own head.

"There, that is something like. You'll do well enough. Your wound, out here, is nothing but a scratch, that will be well in a few days—I can't swear what it would be further East. If you are all right I will drive on, and will reach Glory Gulch some time before dark."

"And we are really living? Oh, me, but this is the strangest of all miracles!"

"No miracle at all, miss; but just what I call a run of solid good luck—the kind I usually have. I've looked death in the face so often that I take the sight easy, even if I see him grin. Will you go on now under my guidance; or shall we wait to see if our Jehu comes through?"

"Go on at once, and leave this terrible neighborhood," answered Ellen, with a shudder. "He is half-way back to Rat Trap by this time."

That was the way that the stage happened to come bowling in under Touch-Me-Not's guidance. He had checked the horses before they had gone over half a mile in their flight, cared for the young lady; and finally brought her through in what might be called safety, and the quickest time on record.

As they entered the door of Goodman's ranch they met squarely a woman going out, and Touch-Me-Not caught a straight, keen look from her coal-black eyes.

"As usual," he muttered to himself. "The female element is in the ascendant. Who in thunder is she? Her face looks familiar, but I swear I can't place it. Anyhow, what are two such women doing in Glory Gulch. Their lives will surely run counter to each other, and I see trouble in the distance. Pity I haven't time to wait here and see it out. I wonder if I can get away to-night."

Then having seen Miss Ellen safely placed in the care of John Goodman's wife, he bowed, and held out his hand frankly.

"I guess I may as well say good-by. Like as not I will be back here again; but just now I'm

looking for ways and means to get to Walnut Bar, and when I look for such things I generally find them. Give my kind regards to your father—and if I don't see him to-night, maybe I will the next time I come along."

"Thank you; and thank you a thousand times for your care and assistance. I wish you could wait a few moments. He will certainly come promptly, for he is looking for me—only the stage seems to be ahead of time."

"The beauty of a new hand at the ribbons. Well, if I see him it is all right. If not—another time. I'm one of the kind that will keep. Good-night."

He turned away and passed out into the main room at the upper end of the building, which served as bar-room, stage-office, waiting room, and any other odds and ends of purposes for which it might be needed.

"Well, sport, I guess you're just in time if you want to go through to Walnut Bar. There's a chance to-night, though you'll have to go down to Black Charley's to see about it—or I kin send down, an' see ef ther's a show in the special that's goin' out in about two hours. They'll just about make the run by noon to-morrow."

"Thanks. If you could attend to it, it would give me a chance to look after my hash. And I'd like to see Canley, too. Judging from his daughter, he must be a nifty man. I tell you she is the clear grit. If it hadn't been for her they would have taken me in, sure."

"That so? Well, he has been tried a little here, and panned out well; though they say he has kinder took water. Him an' Hart Blaine hed some sorter a private cirkiss las' night—an' nobody dropped. Mebbe it was 'cause his darter war comin' that he didn't crook his back. I ain't quite got ther right ov it, but ther boys kin tell you the rights ov it some other time. What we are a-dyin' ter hear is how yer got through yer contract this P. M., and what's become of Irish Jimmy. Couldn't yer reel it out while I'm sendin' 'round to Black Charley's."

"Thanks, if you will be so kind; but it's not much of a story, and I don't usually blow my own horn. If you can pick up a stray agent or two, maybe you'd find more in it than I can make."

"Stranger, you're jest ther kinder a sport we bina-lookin' fur. I sh'd jedge ye'd keep 'thin forty rod ov ther truth, an' gi'n us a chanet ter see what them howlin' cattermounts ov sin ar' rally like. Flip us ther yarn, cully, er this camp'll go dead bust, sure—copperheads an' coal ile, yes."

"And who may you be, my gentle gazelle? If you're spokesman for Glory Gulch maybe I could get you to tell the yarn for me. You looks as though you'd like to."

Touch-Me-Not looked curiously at the individual, and the laugh that arose told him that he had not gone far wrong in his estimate of the man.

In fact it would have been hard to make a mistake, though he was in rather better shape than most men of his class.

In dress he was a travesty of the young stranger.

Though his garments were worn, and threadbare in places, they had once had a fashionable cut. In trying to accommodate themselves to the frame of their present owner they had, however, become comically distorted, they being a mile too wide for his slender form.

His feet, however, were incased in a pair of immense brogans, of the coarsest quality, and on his head he wore a wide-brimmed, Mexican hat, which looked as though it might have belonged to a dozen owners, some one of whom had looped it fancifully in front. Now it hung around a tangled mop of hair in graceful festoons, but left fully exposed to view a white, waxen, clean-shaven, lantern-jawed face, in the midst of which was plastered a huge, bulbous, flaring red nose, with the usual appendage of such nasal organs—a huge wart on the end of the protuberance.

This person, thus addressed by the stranger, drew himself up with a comical burlesque on an air of pride.

"Thankee fur ther complerment. I knowed yer couldn't look me in ther face 'thout droppin' to ther indervidoal yer sees afore yer. Elizer fishbites, no! I'm Jedge Bender ov Black Dam, Jedge William Bender; tho' some of the boys ez is extree frolicsome axes me up to ther toon ov Howlin' Billy. I reckon yer heard ov me. It war me ez cleaned out ther Bullion Boss an' his gang down at Slaughter Bar. I've an eentrest in sich things an' when I drop to a sport like yer-self, that's a badder man ner I be, I jest ties to him, solid. Copperheads an' coal ile, yes."

The gentleman from Black Dam puffed out his chest with a vigor that caused him to give a wheezy, asthmatic cough. It did not take a second glance for a man of average penetration to see that he was the typical bummer of the mining camp, though a rather more exaggerated specimen than is usually met with.

"From Black Dam, eh?" said Touch-Me-Not, in a reflective tone. "I've been there, but I don't remember hearing such a distinguished name as that of Judge William Bender. Still

that goes for nothing, old man. Nominate your poison and give us the latest news. And maybe the rest of the gentlemen would join us. 'It's a blank dry time for corn,' as they say further east."

The inclusive invitation was one that very few felt disposed to decline; but as they moved toward the bar, a brawny-looking man, dressed in a red shirt, corduroy pantaloons, close-fitting cap and high-top boots, who had entered from one door as Touch-Me-Not came in from the other, growled to another, who looked like enough to be his brother:

"Say. Ther young rooster are a-playin' ov us off. Ef he gits old Daddy ter talkin' thar won't be er chance ter hear his yarn afore he's ready ter skip. I don't go much on this yere business anyhow."

"That's so. A feller ez actooally did run ther Cutsleeves wouldn't be so durned 'feared ter talk about it. Thar's somethin' rotten 'bout ther hull yarn ez ther boyees ar' shoutin' on ther street. I moves we hev er experiens meetin' an' find out whar he left Irish Jimmy."

"Jes' so; an' ef ther box an' mail kim through safe."

"No mail did they bring," added a third. "It was cut loose frum behindt, I wouldn't wonder ef thar war some scull-duggery somewhere."

The tones of the three were low; but they were close to the stranger, and it was more than possible they were speaking to be heard. At any rate the young man turned suddenly, halting within arm's length of them.

"They call me Touch-Me-Not in some places, and that's good enough for Glory Gulch. If you don't believe it stir me up, and you'll find me, in the current vernacular, 'a sinner on wheels.'"

"Oh, see hyar, leetle rooster, we ain't tryin' ter tread on yer tail feather; but ef yer sing that way 'round ther Gulch ye'll hev yer comb cut, ding-blasted sure. Jim Canley ain't ther bloomin'est ov shrubs, an' this gal an' you may be a-standin' in with ther agents. That's what we want ter know. It looks bloody suspicious."

"A gentleman, in the language of Arizona, may not want to sound his own bazoo; but injured innocence, you know, sometimes hits from the shoulder, and takes the chances."

Touch-Me-Not was as cool as an icicle; but he was also as rapid as lightning. He crouched and then lengthened out. Three distinct spats were heard. One man dropped like lead to the floor—the young sport had got the whole of his weight in on him—and two staggered back with the blood spouting a stream. A harder bitter than this seeming almost stripling Glory Gulch had never seen.

But a second later a man flung his arms around Touch-Me-Not, and dragged him backward, toward the outer door.

CHAPTER VII.

A QUEEN AND THREE KNAVES.

THE young sport, so suddenly pinioned from behind had no chance to use the strength which was so remarkable in a frame seemingly so slight. A pair of strong arms were wrapped over his own, a hand seizing either one just above the elbow.

Touch-Me-Not did indeed contract his muscles an instant, as if about to make an effort. Then he laughed carelessly, and allowed himself to be hurried along, though his hands wandered toward his breast.

"It is all right, stranger. I am James Canley, and your friend. I want you for an hour, and I've no time for that nonsense in there. We can give those brutes a chance to shake themselves together and stand around and blow awhile. Then, when we get back we will settle them."

The whispered voice was reassuring.

"That's nice for the fellows; but not such a happy arrangement for me. I had the bulge on them just now, but the chief secretary of home affairs couldn't tell how it's going to be when I waltz in again. Always finish your work as you go along. If you don't it's the afterclaps that count."

"Right again. If I had had sense enough to stick to that drift it would have saved me a peck of trouble just now. But it's too late for worry; and not much time for work. I've seen you in business and from your style I judge you're just the man I need. Will you see me through the raffle?"

"I should smile. This hand's played anyhow; deal me another."

"Come then. It's not far from sundown, and I should have been on the road before this, but I had to see Ellen."

Canley had loosened his hold the moment they struck the street; and the two walked hastily away, the colonel leading.

When they had gone a few paces a woman stepped out of the other doorway, where she had been standing, craning her neck to catch a glimpse of the two without attracting attention.

It was the same woman who had met Touch-Me-Not as he entered, and she evidently intended to see in which direction the two were going,

though she sauntered along in a way that might have deceived an unsuspicious mind.

"I say, colonel, keep your head to the front, and look over your shoulder with your ears. See if you can tell me who is this affectionate-looking female in the rear. She's after one of us; and as I'm a stranger here it must be you."

Canley gave a perceptible start.

"No need for me to look backward. Follow me as though it was all arranged before, and perhaps we may be able to double on our trail. The woman has the eye of a lynx—and the heart of a tiger. I'd give a thousand if she had never struck this camp."

The afterthought was added with intense bitterness, and not as a proposition; yet the other answered quickly:

"Make it five and I wouldn't wonder if I could waltz her out, without doing harm to any one. I'm generally ready for a deal; and I tell you, square, I owe you one, and wouldn't mind being your friend."

Before the colonel had time to answer they came to the center house of a block of shanties that were strung along close together. Into this central house the colonel led the way and closed the door, while the woman passed on up the street. Either she thought that she had followed them to their place of destination, or she was afraid that if she halted some attention might be called to herself, and so far she had reason to believe that she had followed the two unnoticed.

But Canley made no halt in the house. Passing straight through, he went out by the back door.

"Is it chance—or does she know something?" he muttered.

"We will have to stand the chance of meeting her between here and the Run. There's no time to waste in dodging."

"Seems to me you are slightly afraid of that bit of feminine vanity. That's bad policy. If you can't beat a ten at the head, hold your cards up, and stack all your chips in the pool. Women and cards are pretty much alike—only I have heard it said that you can't win at both."

"But when you play that game, what do you do when they call?"

"Go dead burst, and start fresh. I don't care what the game is, I back my hand for a leetle more than it's worth, and run the chances."

Before they had gone very far the woman did appear, standing on an elevated knoll that commanded a fair view of the surrounding ground. Her arms were folded, and her face happened to be turned away from them.

"There she is again! See here; if this business takes her in, I don't know but what I'll draw out. I don't like bucking against a woman, nohow, unless it's a clear case of morals or money. If she's not in your game, I can tell you beforehand you'll have bad luck. When I saw her, I wanted to go back and touch the table in Goodman's parlor—and a hefty parlor it is. By the way, I didn't do it; and there she stands."

He halted, and looked toward her with a troubled glance.

"You are wrong!" exclaimed Canley. "I swear you are wrong! It is she that is on my track, and I had hoped that we were rid of her. Come on, though; and if she sees us, let her do her worst. It can only make a bad thing worse. She is in no danger."

And, as if to give the lie to his words, at that moment, as suddenly as if they had sprung from the ground, three men appeared, surrounding the woman.

Canley uttered an ejaculation of wonder, too real to be mistaken, and yet with something of a grateful ring in it.

"By heavens! it looks as though Providence was interfering in my behalf. Trouble has come home to her at last. Yet, what does it all mean?"

"Providence or no Providence, it's my chip when they double-bank a woman."

And Touch-Me-Not started on a run toward the knoll.

CHAPTER VIII.

AND THE KING OF CLUBS COMES ALSO.

WHEN the woman saw the two men disappear in the most pretentious of the block of shanties, she gave a quiet chuckle to herself.

"You suspect me, do you? Very well. Mislead me—throw me off of the trail, if you can. Ah, Colonel James Canley! I am afraid that your hours are numbered; and I would not miss for the world being in at the death. You must come into sight again, if you are going to Grizzly Run, and I take my position on the little knoll just at the lower end of town. I do not care to speak with you again; but I would have you know that I am dogging you to the death."

"But what is this young stranger, with the keen eye and resolute mouth, to him? Who is he, and who the girl with him? There is something strangely familiar in their faces. I should have found out something in regard to them, but time was short; and who would have expected to see him come out with the valiant

colonel? Ah! he scarcely knows the ins and outs of Grizzly Run and the southern trail, or he would think twice before he would risk his life for a stranger!"

So she thought, as she strode rapidly along. A glance in her face would have told even an ordinary observer that she was a woman of resolution; but it took a woman of that kind to dare what she was daring. There were other females in town, but not one of them would have cared, alone and at that hour, to wander off toward the solitude to the south that had such an evil reputation.

Glory Gulch had not a more savory reputation than other towns of its class, and there were men there as bad as the worst.

Yet she was unsuspicious, or seemed to be, of danger, and a satisfied smile curled her lips as she caught sight of the two men in the distance.

"I knew they only sought to blind me. He has courage, and never yet shirked a meeting with a man. Perhaps it would be better for him if he feared less to face a woman. Yet now he cannot turn back, since time flies and the hour of sunset draws near."

Her thoughts ran in almost the same channels as those of the two upon whom she was spying.

After that first glance, she kept her face resolutely turned away. What doubt could there be that they would come straight forward?

There was an unforeseen contingency that her course did not provide for. Had she looked closer she might have seen the lurking forms, and either halted while there was time or been ready to face them with something more potent than her lithe fingers when they sprung forward.

But with her back toward Colonel Canley and the young sport, she also had her back toward the three crouching figures, who had kept a wary eye on her from the moment she came within watching distance.

She drew nearer and nearer to them. At last she halted, and with folded arms stood gazing westward, toward where the sun hung above the trace line of the mountains.

At that the three glanced at one another, and then turning, sprung forward.

The work was quickly done.

Before she had fairly heard the sound of his feet, the foremost had seized her by the two arms, just below the shoulders, holding her as though in a vise.

"Easy, missus," said the man, and then ceased speaking long enough to give utterance to a low, coarse laugh.

"Don't yer be afeared; all this ar' puffectly squar' an' reg'lar. Ef yer don't b'lieve it, hyer's ther papers fur it. We're ossifers ov justus we be, from Californy straight, a-lookin' fur company on ther back trail, an' you fill ther bill."

The woman glared around her. Despising to cry for assistance she was as silent as a caged wolf, while her eyes sought first one and then another of her captors.

"I reckon you've dropped to ther breadth ov this hyer dodge an' don't count on makin' any trouble. Ef yer does we'll slap ther bracelets right on."

"If you mean whether I comprehend this outrage I can answer that I know three villains have attacked one woman; and even her they were afraid to face openly, I make no prayers or threats. When the outrage has been avenged I may tell you who struck the blow."

"Ha, ha! yer does take it cool. We kin stand a few hard words, 'specially ez we is workin' on ther square, an kalkerlates ther law is right behind us an' dead ag'in' you. Ther question are, an' I'll say it ag'in: Does yer willt right under an' go 'long back ter ther 'sylum, er is we ter fight it out?"

"Either you have made some strange mistake or you are a cowardly liar and assassin. No cause have you for this insult that cannot soon be either forgiven or forgotten. Beware how you continue the outrage. I may be apparently an unprotected female; but I have friends who will wash out the insult in blood. My husband—"

"Ha, ha! Ho, ho! Yer husband. All right; he'll plank down a thousan' leetle shiners, just fur ther pleasure or seein' yer in our hands."

"Dry up on yer chaff, Bill," interposed one of the others. "You've got a tiger-cat ter handle, an' them's ther kind it don't pay ter argy with. Jest slide on ther irons an' we'll waltz her out in time ter head off ther Walnut Bar Special. Hold out her hands fur ther ringlets, an' be done with it. Ef yer don't hurry ther job she'll begin ter yell; an' when a woman yells out hyar et means bizziness, sure."

"When she begins ter sound her horn I'll begin ter put ther stopper on her windpipe. Thar's ther thumb an' fingers ez kin just twist her throttle in two. Yer see, missus? We're hyar fur work, an' don't yer fergit it."

The third spoke in a coarser, more positive voice, even, than his mates, and as he dropped out his threat he held up a great, brawny hand, and opened and closed his thumb and forefinger with a suggestive motion. It did look as though one turn of those fingers would twist that delicate, finely poised neck.

Yet still she did not wince, though this time she spoke in a calmer, quieter tone:

"That you have made some wonderful mistake I begin to believe. You know well enough that a single cry from me would bring assistance; and you must believe that you have at least some excuse to hold up before an indignant populace. I have not understood your dark hints—tell me plainly who it is that you seek, and for what?"

"It's what I allus said, Bill. Them hyar loon-atiks kin talk sense at a barn til ther gable ends drap in. Ef justice hed ther right swing, ther'd be more at ther end ov a rool, an' less in ther 'sylums. Kim right erlong, 'us. They say yer p'isoned three men an' sowed house afire; but we ain't nothin' ter do with that. We're only ter bring yer back, an' pocket ther thousand dollar reward."

"It is false. No crime have I committed, no asylum was I ever in, no reward is hanging over my head. I can prove who I am by the best citizens of Glory Gulch, even though I have only been here a short time. I demand to be brought before them."

"Not very much. We mout hev ter go in snacks with th r gang, an' we've put in too much work fur that. We war desposed ter do ther job up comfortable like; but it ain't no use ter fool 'round longer. Hyar's ther irons—on they go."

This time there was to be no temporizing, and she knew it. These men had decided on their course, and would hold to it at every risk. If any resistance was to be made, it must be now. The woman concentrated all her power into one grand effort, seeking to wrench herself from the hands that held her.

She was almost successful—would have been so, probably, if the three had not assailed her in a body.

Then the bracelets snapped over her white wrists, a gag was thrust into her mouth, and the brawniest of the three lifted her in his arms.

The conversation had been rapid, and all this took but a few moments, but now there was a new turn of the wheel, and one that was a very great surprise. As they turned away, a young man of small stature and seemingly slender build, rose up before them, and stood with outstretched finger.

"Hold on a moment, my festive friends, I play against the bank every time. What's the game here?"

"Out of the way, youngster, or ther'll be a case ov sudden sickness. Slog him over the nut if he don't clear the track, Tom."

The ruffian answering to the name of Tom advanced, with threatening mien.

Then just how the thing was done, they never knew, but Thomas lay with his heels in the air and his head on the ground; and something that seemed like a hurricane of catamounts was among them, that hit, and hit, and hit, and at every hit a man went down.

"All down but nine," as they observe in the parlance of the ten pin sharps, 'set 'em up on the other alley', I generally hit to keep; and I think I reached them all."

Three men lay stunned or dazed, but the woman, who had sprung from the arms of her captor, gyved as she was, ran back toward Glory Gulch.

"I'm sorry, colonel, to hurt your feelings by such a shocking display, but there was a woman in the case. Now, if you want to reach any point by sunset, we must rustle around."

CHAPTER IX.

PISTOLS FOR TWO.

THE waning daylight was just ready to vanish over the mountains, and Glory Gulch already lay deep in the shadows.

Half a mile or more from the extremest shanty of the town, on the banks of Grizzly Run, three men were pacing, of whom a glance would have enabled an observer to pick out the prominent personage.

He was a tall, finely formed man, with a firm-set, resolute face, broad shoulders, and an eye as sharp as a hawk's.

"A thousand curses on the coward! He dares not come!" exclaimed this man, in a passionate voice.

"Don't fret yerself about Jim Canley," answered one of his companions.

"He'll be hyer ef ther bank bu'sts, an' Glory Dam swamps the city. He are ez anxious fur ther tea-party ez you be, an' he ain't no slouch with ther tools, neither."

"Why don't he come, then? It is sundown. If he keeps me waiting ten minutes longer, I'll flog him through the camp. Are you sure, Duke, there was no mistake? He understood what he was doing, and that this was the time?"

"Waz I sure? You bet. I hev bin thar afore, an' I don't hev no mistake whar gentlemen hez ther minds made up fur er leetle fun an' glory. He war walkin' up an' down like a ragin' lion, an' when I give him yer message he just fairly bowled, 'That suits me good enough; but if it was sooner, it would be better. I'll be thar.'"

The speaker was a rather small man, with a harsh, rasping voice, and shaggy eyebrows, un-

derneath which his two little gray eyes glittered, with now and then a long, wicked gleam.

He was scarcely known at Glory Gulch, though appearing there occasionally, taking a hand at cards, or joining in other amusements that were not so comparatively harmless. He had been with Hartford Blaine the night before, which might account for his being with him now, though Cyrus Duke, or Cinnamon Cy, as he was sometimes called, was hardly the man that Blaine would naturally bring out with with him.

The latter turned sharply at his words.

"You have been telling too much about that interview. It never sounds twice alike. You said once that he was scared half out of his wits."

"Yes, but I found that story wouldn't wash, so I tried another one."

"You're such an infernal liar that you can't believe yourself. The truth now! Did you see him at all? Jim Canley is not the man to shirk a meeting, if I know anything about him. You men sneer at him; but I've looked in his eyes, and seen nerve all over. I'll shoot somebody to-night, and if he don't come, by Heavens, I'll shoot you, Cyrus Duke!"

The latter threat came out suddenly, with a snap, and Cinnamon Cy winced under it.

"I ain't never throwed off on any man ez trusted me yet, an' I don't see why yer should think I war throwin' off on yer now. Yer give me an unpleasant job ter do, an' I did it. Them's ther thanks I git. All right. Ef he don't come, blaze away."

"An' what'll I be doin'?" he added, *sotto voce*.

The third man interposed.

He was different in size and general appearance from the other two—very different.

He was tall, lantern-jawed, and his clothes bagged around him in a way that suggested a night-gown on a bean pole. His cheek-bones were high, his lips thin, and his yellow hair, which was long and straight, was plastered down smoothly behind his great, protruding ears.

Altogether, from his appearance, he was the last man one would expect to see coming out upon the "field of honor," either as principal or second.

Nor did he, for he was there professionally. He was a personal friend of Hartford Blaine, but his name, so far as Glory Gulch knew it, was Dr. Sylvanus Coffin. Though he had been at the Gulch but a short time, he had already established quite a reputation as a healer in cases of surgery, mountain fever, and the like.

"Don't rile, kurnel," he drawled. "Cinnamon air apt ter be cloudy ez tew his facts; but thar air a solid bed-rock ov trewth in what he sez that makes him quite ontertainin' ef ther handle ov yer spade air long enuf ter reach bed-rock. Ez fur Canley—he air comin' now."

Blaine gave a start, and peered down the gulch.

In the distance he could see two moving forms hurrying toward the spot.

"I believe you are right, and Cinnamon Cy saves his bacon; but some day he will play too long with edged too's. Let him beware."

With this caution he turned away to look at the coming two, who a few moments later stood beside the three.

There was not so much contrast between the two principals as to size and general appearance.

Colonel Canley was the plainer, and, if anything, the more solid looking; but the two revolvers belied around his waist were evidently for work and not for show. He said not a word, but halted at the distance of a few paces, while his friend, or second, stepped briskly forward.

"We came near being a shade late," said Touch-Me-Not, in his airy way.

"Not our fault at all, I assure you; but woman, lovely woman, claimed a few moments of our time. As I was to blame, I hold myself personally responsible to you or your friends, either now or hereafter—though I suppose, of course, you will prefer to settle with the colonel first."

The appearance of this utter stranger was a matter of surprise both to Hartford Blaine and his friends. From his manner it was hard to tell whether he was a man of nerve or a man of ignorance. Anyhow, what business had he there?

"I tell yer," whispered Duke to Sylvanus Coffin, "thar warn't none ov ther boyees would come out with him, an' he's picked up some fresh young tenderfoot ter do ther honors; some uz ez don't know ther man he's backin', er the crowd he bucks agin'. Thar's goin' ter be trouble right hyer. I kin see it in Blaine's left eye-winker."

"Verily, he looks more tew me like a bad little man from Bodie, and I ar'n't sure I shell do business with him. Beware of him, Cyrus, beware. I hev seen sich sharps before."

Duke took another look at the stranger, who, to his eye, had a non-professional air. Then he stepped forward a pace or two to meet him.

"I reckon you're hyer backin' Kurnel Canley's game? That's all right—ef you do the thing up on the square. We like square men out here in Arizony. But ef yer a'n't, it mout

be advisable ter go back an' make yer will, afore this hyar circus takes up. Mebbe, though, yer don't quite onderstand who we are, an' what kind ov a game it are thet you're backin'?"

"My friend," responded the young man cheerfully. "It don't make a continental bit of difference to me who this gentleman is or what the trouble is about. I am very glad I did not allow him to go alone into the midst of such a gang of cutthroats and desperadoes; but it's only on the principle of the thing. I assure you that I had never in my life seen him before an hour ago; and as I expect to leave in an hour or so, I never expect to see him again. And I can't say that I want to. But this is all foolishness. I've made my apologies now let us place our men and have it over."

As Blaine was standing little more than a yard away he could not help but hear this. Now he broke in roughly:

"I didn't think there was a man in Glory Gulch that would take up that man's quarrel enough to come out and see him shot. I'm mighty glad to see I was right. If he had come a little later he would have run against me hunting him with a horse-whip; but I suppose there's time enough for the tea-party, now that he is here."

"Oh, go ahead. My man has no nerves, and he don't bluff worth a cent. But we wouldn't stop you if you want to disburden your mind. Bring a chair, though, before you begin. I'm tired, and I may as well be resting."

"And who are you? We're playing with hands on the board; but James Canley would be none too good to bring out a man to take a snap-shot at the other side. If you draw you drop. Remember."

"That's right. You all look like honest men, and I know I'm a desperate looking case myself; but I'm not half as bad as I look. I assure you, if you woke me up, even if you actually woke me up, you would find me really slow. Don't let me unnerve you, for when you get a closer view I'm by no means frightful. My name is—well, it is Touch-Me-Not, sometimes called 'the Delicate'. I know it is not according to code to address the opposition principal, but being directly addressed myself I could not very well help it. But please confine your remarks to these gentlemen here, and I will do the same."

The young man spoke in a dry, cool tone, in the end of which there was a covert sneer; but after all it was one at which it was hard to take offense. It is more than likely that Blaine's remarks were made for the purpose of inducing Colonel Canley to break in.

But that usually passionate man, with his arms folded, was pacing up and down at some little distance, as if waiting for the work to begin, and showed no sign that he heard or took umbrage at what had been said.

"Touch-Me-Not! That is not a man's name. I have no great desire to risk my life among men who try to hide their identity under a sobriquet. A man that would rob a stage-coach, or pillage a bank, back East, is none too good to foully take away a man's life here."

"That's what I told him, as we came along. That they'd put the meeting pretty late, and seemed to be an irresponsible crowd. If he's willing to risk a shot in the back, after dark, you ought to be. You have two chances to our one. Touch-Me-Not, the Delicate, is as good a name as Cinnamon Cy, any day. Maybe you don't know the rest of his name any better than I do; but that don't make any difference. Mr. Duke, set your man, and we'll have the orchestra strike up."

"It's almost too late," answered Cyrus, looking around him uneasily. "Yer warn't hyer by ten minnits ov the right time, an' you've filled in with wind an' gab sence yer come till now it's almost dark."

"That's no difference. I'm the first one that has talked business. Your man is the best pistol shot in Glory Gulch, while mine can't hit the side of a barn, unless he shuts his eyes. Things will only be a little more even. Place your man or we go off of the field."

From the sharp address there was no appeal, unless it was intended to open up an informal quarrel with the stranger; and that did not seem to be the intent. Cyrus Duke smothered his rage in a way that was a surprise to his companion, Sylvanus Coffin, who had so far said not a word, though he had been listening to every syllable.

"It's too late to toss for it, and the ground's fair every way yer take it. Hev yer ch'ice an' put yer own man up. Mine'll be three rod off with an iron in his hand. That's the way gentlemen fight in Glory Gulch. You kin hev everything ef you want it. Give ther tap fur ther go off; and then you'll see your man drop."

The brutal threat did not at all unnerve the stranger.

He rapidly paced off twenty steps, by chance or skill, choosing a direction which gave little if any advantage to either station.

"There's the distance," said the man who claimed the sobriquet of Touch-Me-Not. "Which ever end of the line your man stands at mine will be at the other."

Hartford Blaine seemed to have made up his mind, for he moved rapidly to the spot from which Touch-Me-Not had begun to step, and took his station.

Colonel Canley, at a gesture from his second, faced him.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" asked Touch-Me-Not.

"My men are," growled Duke, his hand dropping furtively to the revolver at his belt.

"Then, ready, one, two, three, fire!"

CHAPTER X.

A WOMAN LONG, AND TWO CORPSES SHORT.

THE words were dropped out slowly and distinctly by the second of Colonel Canley, and as the last one fell from his lips there was a double report, so blended that the discharge seemed to be but one.

As the sound rung out upon the evening air both of the duelists dropped their weapons, threw up their hands, and fell heavily to the ground.

"By ther holy pover!" exclaimed Cyrus Duke, "he's got us! I knew how this shootin' in ther dark would work. Go forrads, Coffin, an' see if they're both dead."

"And as for yourself, Mr. Duke, I'd advise you to sing slightly small. If you draw that revolver you have your hand on I shall be obliged to plug you myself; and two funerals a day is about as much as Glory Gulch can stand without becoming depopulated. Look after your man and keep your bullets for yourself."

Touch-Me-Not spoke quick and sharp; and not a shade too soon. If his words had not been enforced by the sight of his revolver, aimed squarely at the head of Cinnamon Cy, the latter would have got his work in. His pistol was half way out—and he was not slow in drawing either, and had already stored up a good stock of hate for the easy-spoken, natty-looking little stranger.

Now his hand dropped away from his belt, allowing the weapon to slide back into its place with a jolt.

"Oh, go slow, yerself," he muttered. "Yer don't suppose I'd hev yer taken in, jist when yer of some account. When sich leetle tea parties happens 'round Glory Gulch they wants ter hear ther rights ov it, an' they usually axes with a rope in ther hands. You kin tell ther story, an' kin say it war all fa'r and squar'. Ez fur me I'm goin' over the mount'ins till ther thing simmers down—pervidin' they're both dead."

"Mine is not utterly extinguished," said the little man, looking at Canley, who, at that moment, gave a sigh and a stir; "but I reckon, as he has it through the lungs, he's just as good as up the flume."

The little man rose calmly from his examination, and spoke in a matter-of-fact tone that one would have scarcely used about a wild beast. It might perhaps have sounded easy and natural to the two men; but there was a third listener of whom certainly he never dreamed.

At that moment he heard a light footstep, and then a gasping cry.

"You—you cowards! You assassins! You have murdered him between you. Who is there here who dares say he fired the fatal shot?"

Touch-Me-Not, at the sound of the voice, turned with what for him was a start. There was no mistaking the tones—they were those of a woman.

"Excuse me, miss," he said, quietly as usual, and yet with a certain tenseness about his voice.

"This isn't exactly the spot for a young lady to visit, at this time in the evening, and I would advise you to re-tire. We're a very square little party here; but we don't know how soon some of the bad men around the Gulch may come along, and start things up lively for the boys. Take my advice and go back the way you came. Leave us to run our own clam wagon, and blow our own horns."

While he spoke the young man was peering earnestly at the form that stood darkly lined against the evening air.

That it belonged to a woman he already knew; but to what sort of a woman he could not guess from the sounds that he had heard, since they were too full of agitation.

But at first sight it seemed to him there was something familiar in the shadowy form, and now he recognized it as the woman already twice met that evening, once at the stage station and once at the knoll where he rescued her from the three men.

He saw something more; for her two arms rose until they were outstretched, and he could understand that in either hand was a revolver.

"Ah, you villains!"

This time the voice was marvelously clear.

"Between you you have murdered him! Who was it fired the shot? There was not the man living that could have slain him in a fair duel. Some one shot him from behind, and I am here for vengeance. I am not afraid to face you all, if you all are alike guilty!"

Touch-Me-Not did not wince, though he, first of all, had been lined.

"I'm afraid we don't quite sabbe. There's

two gentlemen here that have been counted out by a mutual understanding, and as far as I know it was a perfectly fair and square arrangement. The question is, which one of the two do you mean? You can bet your bottom ounce that my man had fair play. If he hadn't had, I wouldn't be standing. If you want to go weep on the breast of the dear departed, I'm not objecting. I reckon it's just about the correct thing for you to do, but don't try to light down on the fellow that stood by Jim Canley when friends were scarce."

"What friends could the wretch expect to have? the man who would rob and then insult an unprotected woman. If he has murdered the one who was her friend when she needed a friend, he will find that there is a justice even here to overtake him."

"That is all correct—probably. I see you belong to the other side. Unfortunately, your man and my man both have their gruel, and I'm an utter stranger to the little burg in the distance and to all parties concerned. We had better gather up our dead, and go on to the town."

Grief with this woman had changed into flaming wrath, but that feeling seemed to have begun to subside.

"Who are you?" she asked sharply. "In your voice there is a strangely familiar ring, and yet I know that you are a stranger here."

"I might ask the same question of you. You make any quantity of noise over this little discussion, but for any practical good I don't see that you're worth a cent. I don't go back on my name though, and I always tell it straight in the same town. In Glory Gulch I'll go to dinner as Touch-Me-Not; if that don't suit you, call me The Delicate. In times of trouble you will find me around."

"And I am Ellen Canley."

"The deuce you are! Two of a kind in one hand makes a pair. It strikes me that we're barking up the wrong tree. I should judge that, from the similarity of names, you must have been something to one of the lately deceased?"

He spoke a little curiously; and his answer came, quick and sharp:

"I was his wife; and he was my deadliest foe. But enough of this idle talk. If the two men be indeed dead—"

"You can't prove it by me. Canley I can speak for; but the other gentleman was in the hands of his friends."

"And his friends are—where? Is this a pre-concerted scheme? While I have been talking with you, they have slipped away."

Touch-Me-Not looked around him.

The moonlight now sifted right into the open glade that lay along the run, making every object around distinctly visible.

"Ha, ha!" he exclaimed, bursting into a hard, metallic laugh. "The two have not only sloped, but they've taken the corpses with them!"

It was very true.

In the little glade the two were alone together; and, as they listened, there was nothing to be heard but the gentle sighing of the night-wind, and the soft plashing of the running water.

CHAPTER XI.

HOW THE TROUBLE BEGAN AT JOHNNY GOODMAN'S.

FOR a moment the woman who called herself Ellen Canley stood speechless, while she looked eagerly around. Then once more she threw up a weapon, and it was an even chance that Touch-Me-Not's time had come.

If he had flinched, or made an aggressive movement, most likely she would have fired; and he knew very well that her aim was straight for his heart.

Nevertheless there was no anxiety in his voice as he spoke:

"I wouldn't, madam. You owe me one already, and like as not you'll owe me two or three more before you're done with me."

"How? Explain yourself."

"I had the pleasure a bit ago of seeing you out of what looked like a condemned bad little difficulty. That's nothing here nor there, because, when I see a woman in trouble I always strike in on her side, and find out the rights of the case afterward. But, as I make out the case, it strikes me you'll want to prove that Jim Canley is dead, and I'm the only flea you can put your finger on that can swear he was shot through the lungs before the mysterious disappearance—if that don't make him practically a dead man."

"True, if I could trust you; but something seems to tell me that you are one to hate and fear. Could I know, once, that you were thoroughly devoted to my interests, it might be better for both of us. Dare I trust you?"

"That's fair and square. Some one has gone back on you, I can see, and you're anxious to get even. I'd have taken up your case a minute ago, but I have just thought of something. No, I can tell the truth; but if I were you I wouldn't trust me worth a cent. I'm mighty bad pay—unless—" and his voice dropped into

a thin, compressed whisper—"unless it's a debt of vengeance."

"Ah, you are shrewd and sharp, and know too much—too much. Let it go. You are at least honest enough to give me warning, and you are a brave man, too. You have not winced when the weapon of a mad woman was at your bosom, just as you did not fear to strike in, one against three, when that woman was in danger. Well, go your way; and if it takes you out of Glory Gulch within the hour, be thankful. There are matters here in which it is dangerous for you to meddle, and I would not have you come to grief through me. There. I have given you warning; after this, if you come in my road, I will not hesitate to strike. I neither need you, or care to have you, as my friend. Such as they are, I have plenty of them, and if they play me false, I can strike."

Then this singular woman, who had passed from the highest pitch of grief and anger to the lowest depth of concentrated coolness, turned without further leave-taking, and plunged into the gloomy shadows of the shrubbery that bordered the glade.

Touch-Me-Not shrugged his shoulders, but offered no advice nor opposition. Only he muttered to himself:

"It's unfortunate—this habit that I have of always chipping in for a woman. I came mighty near taking up both sides in what I see is going to be a pretty little family fight. I swear I'd forgotten the other Ellen. I'm afraid this one is going to hold the biggest cards, so I'd better advise the other little woman how to play her hand. I see I'm elected not to get out of Glory Gulch this night. Let's see. The three men at Johnny Goodman's will lay for me, and the three gentlemen from 'Californy' will snatch me bald-headed. Then, if Tom Gouger and his pard, Cinnamon Cy, and a few road-agents, with Irish Jimmy for a make-weight could come in, they'd break me all up. I reckon I'll have fun enough on my hands to last a week. But first I must see if there are any corpses lying around loose. It's getting too infernal dark to see much, but I'll view the ground and see what I can strike."

It was not hard to see in what direction the corpses had been conveyed—always providing the two duelists had been left in that shape after the fracas—but beyond the edge of the thicket all was darkness and impenetrable gloom. He listened, but heard no sound; and after some blind wandering that produced no profitable result he came out once more into the glade and turned his face toward the town, leaving the spot with a swinging gate, that soon brought him in sight of Goodman's.

"Business before pleasure! I guess I'll see Miss Ellen first—"

Then he halted.

It had not before struck him how unpleasant would be the communication he would have to make.

"Confound it, that's so. He's dead. Oh, no! Hanged if he's dead, my eyes deceived me. There wasn't a sign of a bullet through his lungs. He was wounded, though—I hadn't time to find out how badly—and the other man was clean gone dead. Of course he had to light out until public opinion at Glory Gulch had been properly enlightened; and I am the trusted messenger to tell her to look for the best. Of course I am. That sets things right as a trivet, until morning anyhow."

Having arranged his story to his liking Touch-Me-Not entered Goodman's quietly, expecting to find her waiting in the room where he had left her.

But that room was utterly vacant; though, as he stood upon the threshold, Johnny Goodman came bustling in from an opposite door.

He gave a start of surprise upon seeing Touch-Me-Not; then spoke hurriedly:

"Yer back ag'in, sport, an' I ain't any too glad to see you. The gang went down to Black Charley's to see if they couldn't pick you up there; an' there's three more strangers here, askin' fur a man about your size, with a white nose-rag 'round his head. For a stranger and a little man, and a man that looks as though he wa'n't heeled, you get into more trouble and hit harder than there's any use. If you'll take my advice you'll jump the camp and take the trail for Walnut Bar afoot-back. I like sand; but it's a bad load when the wind blows hard."

"If I don't swim I can swamp, so don't you worry. I can shove my own scow. I don't mean to tarry, though. I've just got a word or two for the young lady, Miss Canley; and then I'll skip."

"Glad to hear it. I don't want my place wrecked—and you kin' go at once. She ain't here."

"She is not?"

"No. Her father sent around for her and moved her off, bag and baggage."

"Colonel Jim Canley did?"

"He did. You don't suppose I am throwing off on you?"

"Well, I'll swear! For lively corpses give me Arizona."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"I mean that I saw her venerable parent not half an hour ago, with a ball through his lungs."

I'm a judge of such matters, and I could have sworn that he wouldn't live five minutes."

"Half an hour ago, you say?"

"About that. May be a little longer; I can't swear to the minute."

"Well, you're a cool one, anyhow. I suppose you know, if it's true, that for a stranger to see that much may bring him trouble. I really reckon you're only bluffing; but that hand won't be good. He sent for her right after you left."

"Then there's something rotten about the whole affair. She stood by me when I needed it. By heavens, I'll see her through if it kills a mule!"

"See here, you don't mean to say that you think there's anything wrong about it, do you? Glory Gulch is a hard place, but it wouldn't stand putting up a job on a woman, even if it was Jim Canley's daughter."

"I mean to say there's rocks in getting her out of the way; and alive or dead, that's the game that has been played."

Then came a sudden interruption, for through the open door at Goodman's back roared a hoarse voice:

"Whar's yer dellikate sport? Fotch out that Tetch-Me-Not tell I give him one shake—on'y one. Thar'll be jest two teaspoon ov soap-grease an' a mop er ha'r."

CHAPTER XII.

THE BRUISERS FROM PETERS BAR.

IT was evident that trouble was brewing. The three desperadoes had either got tired waiting at Black Charley's or some one had informed them that their game was here. They were there for "blood and ha'r," and though the spokesman was coarse, he was emphatically in earnest.

Johnny Goodman was accustomed to wild scenes, and he had the reputation of holding his own when a difficulty was forced on him; consequently, as he was a popular man, and never set up for an out-and-out chief, it was very seldom that he had any war on his own account. He did not care to see any of his guests imposed on either; but Touch-Me-Not was a perfect stranger, and it seemed to him that the best way to see him through the present trouble was to avoid it altogether.

He heard the bugle sounding for the fray, and caught Touch-Me-Not by the arm.

"Thar they are now, and in just three minutes this place will be swimming in gore. I tell you, they are the worst men you ever saw, they are the three brothers from Peters Bar, and they live on blood. You caught 'em on the bounce once—I'll own for a little man you hit hard enough to drive a spike—but you can't do it ag'in. They're on the shute."

"That's my name. Just lend me a twenty-four-pound Parrot gun and set them up at ten paces. Why I'd blow them all apart."

"It's no joke I tell you. Listen to them tuning up. They'll be in here in a minute. Them three other men are watching outside, I'll bet a hog; but thar's the winder. Take yer grip-sack over yonder an' skoot."

"You just put that hand-bag where it will be safe and then come along into the slaughter-house. That galoot in there has said about enough, and it's time he heard my horn blowing."

Goodman's hand had relaxed and he was gazing curiously at this little man who actually seemed fond of tempting Providence.

"I ought to, must, see if I can't strike Miss Canley's trail; but somehow I always take the nearest job first."

As he spoke Touch-Me-Not stepped past Goodman, and rapidly traversing a dark narrow passage, on each side of which lay two or three little cuddly holes that were dignified with the name of bedrooms, he threw open the door at the further end, which led into the drinking room.

An hour or so ago and Touch-Me-Not had the greater part of the crowd with him.

He could see at a glance that now things were different. The three from Peters Bar had had a chance to talk, and if they had not been there to run things on their own lead it is more than likely that the citizens at large would have organized a court of investigation. The sudden disappearance of the stranger had seemed to speak volumes against him.

His reappearance was a point in his favor.

"Look out, Sam. Thar he is now," exclaimed the warning voice of a quick-eyed miner, who pointed as he spoke.

Touch-Me-Not had appeared right at the shoulder of the man whose voice he had heard while talking with Goodman. Had he so chosen he could have reached him either with shot or blow before his presence was noted.

The caution was heeded on the instant, for Sam Peters, without stopping to consider whether he was in danger or not, gave a great spring forward, that carried him into the midst of the crowd, when he wheeled about and gazed at the doorway.

The odds were great against Touch-Me-Not, as he very well knew, and he was not now throwing away too many chances.

He stood in the doorway, with his keen eyes

roving around the room, and his hands dropped carelessly into the pockets of his sack-coat. Somehow he looked a great deal bigger than he had done at first sight, though that was partly because the most of those there had seen an exhibition of his prowess. For the rest, they saw that his clothes exaggerated what, to them, had seemed a defect in size; and his thin, somewhat pale face deepened the deception.

"I heard some one calling my name out, as though he thought I was deaf. I assure you my ears are remarkably good, and there's no use to lift your voice above a whisper. I'm here now, take me while you have me, for 'I hain't got long ter tarry,' as the old song has it."

"Curse you, you'll sing a song ter ther music ov one string," retorted Sam Peters. "Yer hit me with er club when I warn't lookin', an' then dusted. I want just one smack at yer ter git even. Ef I don't leave yer head flatter ner a pancake, I ain't no broozar. After that, ef thar's any breath left, yer kin expound whar yer left Irish Jimmy an' the mail-bag. Thar's a heap ov s'pishun in this hyar camp thet yer in with ther gang, an' mebbe be Capt'n Cutsleeve hisself."

"If I was looking around for a man I thought ought to be able to give an opinion, I'd pick you right out. I dropped a few men to-day that looked enough like you to be your brothers. Maybe they were. The chances are that you're all in the same hand, and that you had a finger in the missing mail-bag. I'll bet high you know as much about it as I do; and take small odds that you know more. Irish Jimmy said he got enough of fun the last trip that he drove through, and when he found we meant business he backed down, and if he's not in yet I reckon he went back to Rat Trap. That much's for the benefit of the citizens of Glory Gulch. As for you men from Peters Bar, I'm going to waltz you out, and then, if the good people here know what you deserve, they'll give you a hemp necktie."

"Yer goin' ter waltz me out?"

Sam Peters had been astounded at the cool, matter-of-fact way in which Touch-Me-Not had received his threats and his charges. More than that—he was raving mad.

"You'll waltz me out? Why, you leetle, dried-up, scabby end of nothin', ef I took yer over my knee an' give yer one whack, thar wouldn't be enough left ter grease my paw."

"Exactly, my friend. Only 'you can't tell much about the pudding until you chew the string.' Of course, if you bring on a whole community I've got to wilt; but for the tribe of Peters—I'm good for the three best men from the Bar."

Touch-Me-Not had a purpose.

If he could keep the men of Glory Gulch from taking a hand in he would know just the amount of the contract on hand, and where to get his work in.

"I tell yer I'm from Peters Bar, and I don't ask any man to help me. I'm jist dyin' fur one clip at yer, an' I sw'ar I can't kill yer till I git it. Take yer hands outen yer pockets an' stand up to me. I'll drive yer right down inter ther ground."

The bully undoubtedly spoke the truth. His wounded vanity could only be soothed by a chance to show that the besting he had already received at fisticuffs was all a mistake. It was to give him this chance that his brothers kept quiet in the background.

"That's business. You and your brothers shuck yourselves of weapons, and I'll do the same. Then the fun will begin. But I don't let my revolvers go out of my hands until I know that I'm not going to have a shot in the rear."

"Thar, you wall-eyed, knock-kneed, tortle-toed yellow-belly, thar's my tools, an' I never took 'em off afore a livin' soul afore. You boys peel yourselves, too. It's a durned low-down piece ov work mashin' a jack-a-dandy hop-o'-my-thumb like him, but I'd die ef I didn't. Give him fa'r play all, er ye'll hev ter settle with Big Sam ov ther Bar."

The man was more than ever in earnest, for he tore off his belt and cast it rudely to the floor, and then turned to his brothers, who sullenly did as they were bidden.

"Here, Johnny, hold these!"

In some inexplicable way Touch-Me-Not produced a pair of revolvers, a derringer and a twelve-inch bowie-knife. Where they all came from was a conundrum that those by could not answer; but there they were. He placed them in Goodman's hands.

"Hold tight to 'em, which I think you will when you see the thing's got ter be did. I'll trust your sand."

Then, with hands well up, he darted at Sam Peters.

CHAPTER XIII. GRUEL FOR THREE.

IN the previous affray Touch-Me-Not had got in his work so expeditiously, and vanished so suddenly, that no one had any very fair idea how the thing had been done; but the three brothers from Peters Bar did not believe that it could be repeated.

So confident were they that, though the little

man had offered his defiance to the whole three, the two brothers had not moved a step after Sam had howled out:

"Leave this hyar kid ter me. He's a wind-bag, an' I'm 'round ter flatten him."

The score or more of men of the Gulch who stood around shared his confidence, for though there were many there who were well versed in the arts of rough and tumble, and were counted number one men, and even some who had a very fair idea of fistic science, there were none who understood the immense advantage that trained skill could give a little man who had extraordinary strength to back it. Since the revolvers had been laid aside the odds would have been ten to one in favor of the larger man.

Touch-Me-Not, with his coat off and hat laid aside, stepped straight forward, his hands hanging loosely by his side; while Peters bounded to meet him with his fists threateningly raised. He evidently expected to crush with the first blow his little antagonist, whose head seemed to offer a fair mark.

Just outside of striking distance Touch-Me-Not halted, and then sprung suddenly a pace backward, just in time to avoid a tremendous right-hander, that was aimed at the bridge of his nose.

"That settles it, Mr. Peters," said the little sport, quietly. "You hit like a trip-hammer; but you can't fight worth a cent. I've got you."

The remark carried its own proof with it for his return, left and right, came in like lightning, and both blows were planted squarely on the mark.

Down to the pit of his stomach dropped Peters's hands.

It was the first time he had ever got a hot one there, and though he had plenty of bulldog courage, for the life of him he could not help the involuntary movement, which threw his head forward just as Touch-Me-Not gathered himself together from the force of his own strokes.

The latter saw that he had the advantage he had counted on, and did not hesitate an instant. The stoop made by Peters brought him just in distance for a straight shot from the right shoulder, and the little sport sent it in, and his weight along with it.

Under the chin went the knuckles, that now seemed to be of steel, and the ponderous form of the burly Peters went to the floor with a tremendous crash.

"I reckon he don't see anything about me now that looks like a road-agent. Trot out your next giant."

The next giant, however, was a pair. Enraged at the fall of their brother the Peterses waited for no further invitation or preparation; but one from either side bounded at him.

Glory Gulch was more than excited by this time. At least, the section present was boiling over. The cause of the trouble was entirely lost sight of in the intensity of the interest stirred up by this prize-fight for such uncertain stakes.

And, as often happens in rough, law-defying societies the tide of sympathy was turned in spite of their own wishes. Glory Gulch began to look upon the little man as their own peculiar champion, who was taking the shine out of Peters Bar.

Goodman, too, had made up his mind to make the best out of a bad case; and without saying a word one way or the other he stood a little in the rear, holding Touch-Me-Not's weapons. The spectators, understanding that shooting would not begin for a season, were ranged around the sides of the room, leaving quite an open space for the combatants.

There was no nonsense or delay about them. The three seemed likely to come together in the middle of the floor, just under the chandelier, the lamps in which made the spot almost as light as day.

It was a rough, stout affair—two great pieces of plank crossing each other, and suspended from the ceiling by a rope at either end. Touch-Me-Not expected no mercy—and he was inclined to show none; but he was wise enough to remember that awkward strength, when it does connect, gets away with the spriest little man living, and that his marvelous good fortune might come to an end when it was most dangerous for it to do so.

And somehow he had an idea that this fray, which he had gone out of his way to meet and foster, was part of some prearranged scheme. It was this consideration that made him push it through to the end.

There was, indeed, a murmur of disapprobation in the ranks of the wall-flowers at seeing two upon one, but public opinion had not been so completely reversed that there would be any unasked-for interference. Touch-Me-Not had to look out for himself, and he knew how to do it.

He turned suddenly, and bounded toward the man upon his right, with his hands in a position well calculated for either attack or defense.

Bill Peters saw him coming and halted. He had no intention of throwing himself open to one of those lightning strokes in a first sudden flurry.

The movement was only a feint.

While Peters stood on guard, with his hands held not so much for a blow as a grasp, Touch-Me-Not wheeled, dashed first forward, and then into the air, seizing one double arm of the chandelier as though it had been a trapeze bar.

One great swing he gave and then, loosening his hold, he shot through the air, feet foremost.

He struck full against the third of the men from the Bar, who was totally unprepared for the terrific descent.

What wind was left in his body would not have been enough to sound a toy whistle.

As for Touch-Me-Not, he turned a back hand-spring, twisting as he turned, and flung himself at his remaining antagonist, who, far from offering any resistance, was striving to follow the lead of the men of Glory Gulch and get out of the way, for there was every appearance of a catastrophe.

A couple of lamps had been flung to the floor, where they lay with broken chimneys, flaming furiously. There were plenty of men there who would sooner have risked bullets than coal-oil on the rampage.

"That saves the whole gang," said Touch-Me-Not, as the last man went to the floor. "I don't want any more foolishness, and unless my three California shrubs come in, I won't have it. After this I'll take a thing with a hole in it. Johnny Goodman, hand me the utensils."

But Johnny Goodman had fallen back toward the front door with the crowd. At least, he involuntarily gave a few steps when the rest made a general retreat, though he wheeled at the doorway, his arms still full of deadly weapons, and looked to see what was going on, for he heard a strange coarse voice exclaim!

"Hyar he ar', boyees; we's jist in time. Hands up thar, an' down on yer knees! Ef we can't find ther woman, we'll hev ther hull vally ov her outen yer hide."

Through the rear door, at the back of Touch-Me-Not, another trio rushed in, with revolvers ready drawn, just in time to take up the fray where the Peters brothers had left off. They had heard the noise and the shouting, and were ready for a hand, for they were the three who had been so roughly handled but a little while before at the edge of Glory Gulch. They recognized, however, that with the fist they had no business with this little man—who weighed a ton; and for once the drop seemed about to be on him; for no Johnny Goodman was then near to hand him back the usually ready revolvers.

Touch-Me-Not recognized the voice. In reality but a few seconds had elapsed since the discomfiture of his former antagonists, two of whom lay stretched upon the floor.

But he had no idea of obeying the stern command. His pistols were out of reach, but there was a potent weapon just at hand.

With a spring he reached the flaring lamps on the floor, and then rose with one in either hand, waving them above his head in great flaming balls of fire.

"Sail in, my children, and we'll all go up the flume together. You hear me, say?"

Regardless of the leveled weapons, he leaped straight at the three men, who now first realized the condition of affairs, and stood for an instant staring blankly.

Then, without a word, they turned on their heels and dashed down the narrow hall in full retreat.

At the same time, Touch-Me-Not flung the blazing lamps out into the street through the nearest window, when one of them burst with a great splash of flame.

"Elijer fishbites, pard, but yer done that well. Yer a hoppergrass on stilts, you be, copperheads an' coal-ile, yes!"

Behind the bar arose the angular figure of Billy Bender, a glass in one hand and a black bottle in the other.

"I run ther chanctes with yer, pard. Oh, I'm a solid man, you bet. Ther jedge never throwed off on a pardner yet; ef yer don't b'lieve me, ax Circus Pete, er Dad White, er enny ov ther boys. Hyar's to yer."

And there was a long drawn gurle as Howlin' Billy slowly drained a brimming tumbler of the ardent.

CHAPTER XIV.

A RAID ON THE CAMP.

DADDY BENDER, of Black Dam, never missed a chance. When the rest evacuated he took possession, though not as the reader can easily imagine, through any devotion to Touch-Me-Not, but because he was willing to risk fire and bullets, for an unlimited dose of "benzine."

Goodman's attention had been so thoroughly occupied with affairs in the middle of the floor that he had not given a thought to what might be going on behind his bar.

The voice of the man from Black Dam, sounding just when the danger was over, recalled the worthy proprietor to his other interests.

"Hold on thar, you long-legged, slab-sided, sheep-stealing bummer from Black Dam! Drop it!"

His words rung out with startling earnestness, and he emphasized them by taking sudden aim at Billy's head, with one of Touch-Me-Not's revolvers, which he had cocked and ready for business.

"For glory's sake, don't shute. I'm on'y takin' keer ov things, an' every snort I take I jist chalk one down. It's all right, an' ef that thing goes off it might bu'st ther bottle. Don't! Ough!"

And then Billy sunk suddenly on his knees, out of sight behind the bar; but just above its edge appeared the inverted bottom of the bottle, while the irate proprietor heard a rapid gurgle, that told him that Billy was making the most of his last chance.

Touch-Me-Not broke into a laugh. It was a comical climax to the intensity of the late unpleasantness.

"Let him go, Johnny; I'll pay the damage. The old man must have been mighty dry, and it will do him good to get a square mouthful. Maybe I can get him to talk a little; he seems sort of bashful-like on ordinary occasions—a cross between a booby owl and a hump-back sphinx. A silent man, if I understand him."

"A silent man—oh, thunder! If he's a silent man what would the Gulch do if it had a talker one?"

"Thar, jedge, come out ov thar. We'll chalk it down as seven ordinary drinks; but about five more would bu'st the barrel."

Howlin' Billy came out from behind the bar with a subdued mien—except that his eyes twinkled with satisfaction. He extended his hand toward Touch-Me-Not.

"I know'd it, old man, I know'd it the minnit me peepers tuk in yer face. Yer wouldn't throw off on an old side-pard like meself. I don't jest egzactly disremember, but me thinks it war in Sacramento, in 'fifty-five, that we disported on ther green together, an' when we run shole on ther bar you waltzed south ter perspect torrads Tejon Pass, eh?"

"About what do you suppose my age to be, old man? Why, in 'fifty-five I didn't have my first boots yet. Don't try any of your dead-beat plans on me, for they won't win a dime; but if you can tell the plain, unvarnished truth, and know anything about this region and its people, I'll be able to do you heaps of good."

"Oh, now yer hit me whar I live. Why, I jist kept in me youth ther fambly in back-logs with ther cherry-trees I whacked off. An' hatchets, copperheads an' coal-ile! what hatchets it tuk ter keep up ther supply ov trewth! Hitch right onto me, pard. I'm a hundred an' forty to ther square inch, an' standin' on ther first notch. Ther people 'round hyar thet I don't know hez bin dead ten year. Ain't it so, Mister Goodman?"

While the two were speaking Touch-Me-Not had regained his weapons, which dropped out of sight, and the two Peters brothers had staggered up and out in a dazed sort of way. It might have been chance, or it might have been design, but the victorious little sport had carelessly shifted his position and stood out of the range of the windows at the end of the bar and facing the doors, through which the men of Glory Gulch now came sliding in. There was no sign, however, of the routed six putting in an appearance.

To Bender's query Goodman yielded a ready assent.

"If you want a man that knows the ropes, the judge is thar, er tharabouts; but ef you want a man that tells the truth—I ain't got a word ter say. I reckon ther old man b'leves what he says, but that's a thunderin' sight more than ther rest of us does. But I thort you war goin' on ter Walnut Bar?"

"Walnut Bar will keep. I'm in business here, and I don't see that there can be much done before morning. I want to go out by-and-by and look around."

"See here, ef yer bound ter stay in Glory Gulch, I'm kinder under contract ter back yer game; so, ef you'll take my advice, yer won't go howlin' 'round this burg ter-night. I don't b'leve thet anybody'll come in ter my house an' git measured for a wooden overcoat, but ef they ketch yer out whar they hev ther chanct—good by, John! You sabbe! They'll double-bank yer all 'round."

"That's so," admitted Touch-Me-Not, reflectively. "I've been fooling all the evening with six men, and haven't a corpse to show yet. I always was kind of soft-hearted; and now I've got all my work to begin over. Never mind. Give me a bottle of your mildest dew, and Judge Bender and I will retire for a little private and confidential discourse. If any of these shootists from Peter's Bar or California come around, tell them I'm taking a nap, but will be out at nine. And, gentlemen of the Gulch, step up and saturate at my expense. You're just the squarest men here I ever met. I was a stranger here and you gave me a show. If you're fond of fun here, keep that up and you'll get oceans of it. I'm the most peaceable man in the world; but it don't do for outsiders to touch my toes."

There were a good many of the Gulchers present, for The Blizzard saloon had emptied itself, and every man that had come drifting along had stopped to see what was the matter.

The crowd gave a satisfied cheer, and it was some little time before Touch-Me-Not could tear himself away. Then Goodman showed him into one of the little caddy-holes at the rear of the house.

It was not much of a room, but it had a bed in it and a rough stand, while at the rear end was a window, or what was intended to be a window, though for the present, it was closed by a heavy shutter that seemed stout enough to stand a siege.

Once alone with Howlin' Billy, Touch-Me-Not took up the lamp and held it to the face of the bummer, while he scrutinized it thoroughly.

"Old man, you've got outside of a power of forty-rod to-night without it's running away with you; can you keep that up?"

"Every day in ther year. Thar ain't ther man livin' es ever see'd me throw'd."

"And you're fit for business to-night?"

"Yer kin stack up yer duckats on that. But hol' on; Elijer fish-bites, hol' on! I'll swar yer me old side-pard, Johnny Ling, what I know'd back erlong in 'fifty-five. It war in Sacramento ez we bloomed tergether."

"Dry up on that," said the sport, sternly. "I don't want any side-pard business in mine."

If you want a name for me, and Touch-Me-Not is too long, call me Hammond, Courtly Hammond. I'm not given much to either profanity or long speeches. The first is the mark of an idiot; and the last of a man who is trying to find out what he means himself. But I tell you short and sharp; that I don't want to hear anything about your own exploits, at Sacramento or elsewhere, until I ask you. Now then, do you know a slab-sided Yankee doctor here; and if so what's his kind?"

"You bet Coffin's his handle, an' he keeps his pill-shop jist beyond ther Blizzard. He hain't bin hyar long; but he's got a pile ov friends. When any one hez er knife nigher his vittals than ther law erlows, er hez got plugged in the amiable fandangs this hyar camp derlights in, he's ther double-derstilled extrack ov calomile what brings 'em through. Oh, he's ther poplar man et Glory Gulch, copperheads an' coal-ile, yes."

"All the same, he's a confounded rascal, I half suspect. You know Colonel Canley?"

"Thar yer hev it ag'in. Him an' Hart Blaine hed it las' night. I kin read yer ther pedegree outen er book."

"And there's a woman in camp, that I reckon hasn't been here very long—Colonel Canley's wife maybe. A black-eyed, long-haired, queen of a woman, that seems to be sweet on this Blaine. Do you know anything about her?"

"Hol' on!"

There was a sudden change in the voice of the disreputable old man, and Touch-Me-Not looked at him with evident curiosity.

"Are you sick, old man?"

"Reach me the camphene. It ar'a suddint spell, sich ez I git when it's too long atween drinks. Never mind. It'll be O. K. now. What's that you war sayin'? No. I hain't never heard ov any sich woman."

"By the way, Billy, it seems to me I have heard something about your 'side-pard,' as you call him, and how you flourished around Sacramento in 'fifty-five. You were looking for a woman then—a tall, black-eyed, long-haired woman, called Ellen."

Howlin' Billy's face had already a ghastly pallor, but now he whitened to the tip of his bulbous nose.

"You've ketched me this time, pard," he spluttered out at length. "I never war in Sacramento. Thar ain't no ust ter play off roots on you; and I won't try it ag'in. Copperheads an' coal-ile, no!"

Billy's speech ended in a sickly giggle, and he gazed anxiously at his vis-a-vis.

"That's the way to talk," answered Touch-Me-Not, with a laugh almost as sickly as his own. "When a man catches you in a yarn, and you see you can't pull through, back square down. We won't hear any more about that southern trip. I guess you'll do, however. I'll just corral that liquid lightning, and we'll be moving. There's a heap of ground I want to get over to-night."

Touch-Me-Not, as he spoke, stowed away the bottle under the pillow of the bed, and then advanced to the window.

The fastenings on the inside were easily managed, and at a motion Billy slid through the opening. Touch-Me-Not followed, and carefully closed the shutter.

"Now we'll rustle around, old man; and the first place we'll go to is Jim Canley's lay-out. I reckon the young lady has turned up missing; but it will be well enough to see."

CHAPTER XV.

TOUCH-ME-NOT TUMBLES.

WHEN the three Peters brothers got together on the outside, they were the worst-beaten trio that Glory Gulch had ever seen. If they could have worked their own sweet will, Touch-Me-Not would not have lived another half-minute.

Fortunately for the little sport, the three had not their arms, but were compelled to look around through the crowd to find the man to whom they had been intrusted.

They found also, that no one but themselves was in a bloodthirsty mood, for the sports of Glory Gulch were disposed to consider the whole affair as the joke of the season.

One little man had not only whipped three known bruisers, but had run some twenty or more off of their own peculiar stamping-ground.

So it was that when Sam Peters went crawling toward a window, with his revolver cocked, he heard a half a dozen warning voices:

"Hold on thar! Don't yer run yer engine through thar till yer rings ther bell!"

"Glory Gulch won't stand that. Ther sharp was squar' with you an' you can't take him foul when he ain't got no show!"

"Ef yer wants ter play chief an' run this hyar camp, begin outside."

Sam Peters seemed little inclined to heed this counsel; but his brothers either thought discretion to be the better part of valor, or they had some other reason. They muttered some words in his ear and half dragged, half led him off.

Anyhow it was a clear case of taking water, and their retreat was greeted with a low cheer. It was after this that the crowd filed into Johnny Goodman's, and drank with the hero of the evening. If he had chosen he could have found plenty of good men who would have been proud to lead him around on the war-path. A good many were disappointed that they did not have any chance, and waited around in hopes of something developing, but they were doomed to disappointment. Touch-Me-Not, under the guidance of Howlin' Billy, was patrolling the camp on his own account.

The first place he asked the old man to guide him to was Colonel Canley's.

It was in the nature of a test question; and sure enough Bender brought up in front of the shanty through which the little sport had dodged to avoid the woman who afterward turned up at the close of the duel.

"Thar's whar he hangs out when he's to home, but I don't guess you'll find him thar now. He's most likely rampin' round town. Ef you'd 'a' looked in at ther Blizzard thar'd bin some show."

"Don't fret yerself. If he's in town he'll be here to-night. That's what I'm trying to find out."

There was no light to be seen about the building; and several vigorous applications of the knuckles failed to produce any result.

"He ain't thar, yer kin jist stake coin on it."

"No, and I didn't much expect that he would be. I'd give about a slug for a little square talk with some man that has seen him since sunset. I guess we'll go around and beat up Dr. Coffin's quarters, though I don't suppose he'll be home either."

"Yer ain't got far ter prance. It's jest 'round ther corner. Be thar in ther snap ov er gray wolf's teeth. Thar's a light in ther winder, ez me eyes kin see from hyar."

"Go for it, then; and we'll roust him out. He can sing if he wants to, but I'm not sure he's the kind that can be made to."

"You bet he ain't, rocks. Why he's just ther coolest hand in this hyar city. He ain't no sich man ez them Peters boys; but he's mighty bad. Ef it's all ther same, you kin go in by yerself, an' I'll cool me heels out hyar a leetle while."

"You ain't afraid, are you?"

"Well no, pard. I don't jist reckon I'm afear'd of any man on this hyer footstool when you're 'round ter tie to; but I jist don't keer ter talk with him ter-night. Copperheads an' coal-ile, no."

The two halted in front of the little shanty, in which a light was evidently burning; though a newspaper, pinned up as a blind, prevented any one from seeing the interior.

By the moonlight Touch-Me-Not could see that a tin sign was tacked on the door.

He gave a quick, decided rap or two, and this time speedily received an answer.

"Jest a minute, mister, an' I'll be at yer service. Thar now."

The door flew open, disclosing the tall, gaunt form of Dr. Sylvanus Coffin.

"What air the diffikilty, stranger? Was it cut er bullit, and air ther man drunk er sober?"

"Neither. It is my own case that I want to have a bit of private consultation with you about. If you are at leisure I'll walk in; if not I'll call some other time."

"Come in then. I should opine thet it war a case of mount'in fever. Them three air about all I hev occashun to prac-tise my skill on. Ez I see yew air from ther East it air likely. I kin slaughter it, stranger, an' no mistake."

"It is no mountain fever that I want to consult you about. You probably recognize me?"

Touch-Me-Not had stepped quickly into the room at the invitation.

The doctor gave a whistle that might indicate surprise.

"Yaas. Yew air the man thet war with Jim Canley. If he had it threw the lungs it air no use tew ask how he air."

"Why, confound you, that's just the question I was going to ask you. There was some sort of a gouge game being played there and while that woman was doing her caterwauling I lost sight of my man for a moment, and that moment has strung out into some hours. The fact is, when I looked around I couldn't find him, and I

haven't seen him since. What I want to get at is, what did you do with him?"

"What did I do with him? My friend, yew air crazy. I hed my hands full with Hartford Blaine. Yew said Canley had it threw ther lungs, an' that's all I know about it. Ef he's missin' yew berry'd ther corpus."

The doctor looked keenly at his visitor; and spoke in a way that would have convinced almost any one else.

It did not convince Touch-Me-Not.

"That filly won't trot. You and that snag-toothed grizzly, Cinnamon Cy, skipped out and took the two with you."

"That air a statement that I mout contradict, fa'r an' squar'; but 'twouldn't be no use, bekase yew hev yer mind made up. As I've diskivered it's sumtimes onhealthy tew suggest tew a stranger that he's mistook, I kin merely say—prove it."

"That's all right. That brings it down mighty fine. You're in league with the gang, and when the cleaning-up day comes we'll wring you out dry."

The doctor rose up in wrath. His face flushed, and then came a sudden angry glitter into his eyes.

"I hev bin here sence this camp war fu'st sot down here, an' I've bin west ov the Rockies sence 'fifty-nine, an' no man sed I b'longed to a gang, an' nobody shell say it. Take that air back, stranger, er ther'll be blood on ther floor."

"I wouldn't, doctor. I really wouldn't. Don't you see I have you covered? That's the disadvantage of swallow-tails. You've got to draw to shoot. Why, I'd have a dint in the bridge of your nose before you could get that iron out that you're feeling for."

The jeering tone of Touch-Me-Not might have well maddened the man who heard it, but it seemed, on the contrary, to cool the doctor down wonderfully. His hand dropped away from his hip, and he took a step or two backward, while the ghost of a smile curled his thin lips.

"You've come in here tew make a riot, and ef I war to shute yew down, I guess you'd be paid fer. Yew air not in good odor in this camp. But I hev suthin' else tew dew than buckin' ag'inst every drunken rowdy as wants tew insult me. Mebbe some day I kin go tew git even."

"You'll hardly make a fortune trying to get even with me. The fact is, you will be mighty apt to want some of your own pills and plasters. But there's one question more before I skip, and I'll ask it just to show my good will. What did you fellows among you do with Jim Canley's daughter? I tell you Ellen Canley has some solid friends, that will make no end of a row if she disappears."

"What air this nonsense tew me? I didn't know he hed a darter, an' ez fur Ellen Canley—that's his wife—she air ez crazy ez a loon."

"You'll have a chance to expound on that subject when the Vigilantes bring the matter into court. I've given you your chance; but you're as bad as the rest, and you'll have to go up with the gang. Good-night!"

Touch-Me-Not spoke carelessly; but he watched his man as he spoke, to see if there was any chance of his changing his mind.

Dr. Coffin's eyes met his steadily, and seeing this, Touch-Me-Not wheeled and stepped a pace or two toward the door.

Then there was a little shoot of flame, a stunning report, and the room was full of drifting smoke, while under its veil Touch-Me-Not lay prone upon the floor.

CHAPTER XVI.

BETRAYED AND ENTRAPPED.

TOUCH-ME-NOT had made the mistake of taking too much for granted.

When Colonel Canley dragged him out of Johnny Goodman's, the little sport supposed that Ellen and her father had met, and that it was by reason of the story she had told that he sought his aid in the affair on the banks of Grizzly Run.

That was altogether a mistake. Colonel Canley had not seen the messenger dispatched to inform him that his daughter had arrived, had not met her, and had heard next to nothing in regard to the stranger who had dropped in at Glory Gulch.

On the contrary, he had taken him up on account of what he saw, and if he made a mistake it was because he had not taken account of disturbing influences.

Ellen Canley accepted the report of the messenger she had seen dispatched in perfect good faith, though it gave her a little start.

"It's all right, miss, an' ther kunnel's no end glad ter hear that yer hyar; but he ain't promernadin' Broadway jist now, seein' ez it wouldn't be ther thing ter interdoose Glory Gulch to yer notis with er funeral. You'll hev ter kim to his lay-out ef yer wants him ter enjoy ther comfort ov yer company."

With the experience that she had had of the mining-camp region, this, so far as she understood it, might seem startling, but not altogether unreasonable. Ellen delved for further elucidation.

"I am afraid that I don't altogether grasp

your meaning. Is he in any particular danger?"

"Some one is: mebbe it's ther kunnel, mebbe it's Hart Blaine. There's a right smart sprinklin' ov an' idea that when them two comes together ag'in one ov 'em'll git his las' sickness. An' not wantin' ter put up ary string games on er young leddy ez looks ez tho' she kim frum ther States, I reckon ther odds ar' fifty ter one that Blaine ar' ther best shot."

"But what is it all about? Surely there can be no such desperate cause for hatred that this Blaine would attack a man in the presence of the child he had scarcely seen since she was an infant?"

"Great Jewewsulem, yes! They hed a row las' night an' didn't draw. Ef that thing war ter last, whar'd they stan' with Glory Gulch. I tell yer, miss, they've got ter burn powder some time, an' it's on'y on 'count ov circumstances ez it kin be put off ter-night. It's got ter kim to-morrer so now's yer chance. Ef yer don't know whar he lives I kin offord ter pilot yer round. Ef him an' Hart Blaine met on ther street, I tell yer you could step over dead mutin'."

"And who may you be?"

Ellen asked the question with a last remnant of caution.

"I'm Honest Hank, miss; an' I woul'n't tell a lie fur a millyun. Why ther sport cottoned right down to me, fust sight ov me voracious face. Didn't yer see how he picked me out, an' flung me a five? You kin hook onter me miss, an' you'll find me stub an' twist, A No. 1, old hoss-shoe nails an' silver steel, I'm hefty."

"And you advise me to go straight to my father?"

"Me? Blazes no. I don't advise nothin'! I only tell yer what ther old man said."

"True enough. It was because he wrote me that, if he did not meet me I should come here and wait for him, that I did so. Wait a moment, I will tell them that I am going and then I will be ready."

"Take yer time. I ain't nothin' on me mind ter make me worry, an' I got me pay in advance so wichever way ther cat hops I'm secure."

Mrs. Goodman was a true western woman, understanding life as it was.

She rather corroborated what Honest Hank had said, and offered no objections to the departure of her guest, so that Ellen went away without the least foreboding of evil.

"Glory Gulch ain't no slouch of a city, an' you'll find it a right smart sprinklin' ov a walk; but jist foller me an' I'll take yer through, an' ef yer can't make it I'll git a wheelbarrow."

"But where are you taking me to?" asked Ellen, as she saw that the way was getting more desolate than ever.

"Right out to ther Slap Jack. That's his latest find; an' they do say ther strike ar' goin' ter pan out three oughts sure, an' ez many more ez yer dar' ter stick on ter ther end ov 'em. You'll find it a regular fort, miss. That's ther way we hev ter hev it out hyar."

The shadows of the twilight were fading away into the darkness. With them went sight and sound of the Gulch, and a wall of thick blackness arose around her. They had turned into a narrow canyon. So far as knowledge of location went Ellen was lost utterly.

She stopped short and peered around her.

Honest Hank had sharp ears, or else he was expecting some such movement. He halted also.

"I reckon yer ain't got yer Arizony eyes yit. I didn't think er that. Mebbe yer can't see the way ez plain ez you'd like?"

He asked the question with such utter simplicity that Ellen was almost dumfounded.

"See!" she exclaimed. "It is darker than a cellar. I can see nothing—not even you. What trap is this you are leading me into? I will not move another step."

"Oh, yes yer will. Yer a stranger hyar; but it'll all come to yer in a few minutes. Hyar's the path, plain ez a chimbley; yonder is ther Slap Jack; and thar's ther light in the winder. Look right over me shoulder an' ye'll see 'em all."

"But I cannot see you, much less the things beyond."

"Why it ar' plain ez day. Hold out yer finger an' see if I don't tech it the fust try."

Ellen was not yet frightened; she was firm. What Honest Hank said was beyond belief, and if he was trying to deceive her there was some motive beyond.

Yet almost unconsciously she put his words to the test. Her right hand was in her bosom; but she held up her left, with the forefinger extended.

Almost on the instant Honest Hank placed his own upon it.

"Ha, ha! so yer think it's dark? Bless yer soul, this ain't nothin'. Less ner a week ye'll see right through it. They all does. It's in ther climate. Kim on about ten steps more an' then I kin leave yer in yer father's buzzom. Ef yer can't see, ketch on ter me coat-tail an' I'll tow yer through."

"I know nothing else that I can do."

Ellen advanced a step or two in the direction

of the voice, and caught Honest Hank by the collar.

Then her voice changed suddenly. The touch of hesitation went out of it. Something round, cold and solid pressed tightly against the skull of Honest Hank.

"I suppose this is all right but I wouldn't be my father's daughter if I didn't look after my safety when in such a dubious strait—Lead on now; but I give you fair warning that if your road turns out to be crooked you will have a bullet in the spot where your brains ought to be. I held straight to-day on the road-agents; and I'll hold just as straight to-night on you."

Honest Hank had the remarkable faculty of seeing in the dark almost as well as in the light, but Ellen's movement was a complete surprise. Before he could guess her intention she had him at her mercy.

"That's confounded rough treatment ov me mother's only darlin'; but ye'll be ashamed ov yerself, I sw'ar yer will. I'll lead off, an' when yer old man sees yer waltz me inter ther Slap Jack at ther muzzle ov er pistol he'll jist git up an' r'ar. I say now, yer wouldn't go back on a poor lone orfun boy, ez ar' ther on'y support ov a widder mother? Go slow now, till yer see it ar' all right."

Ellen might yet have been deceived by his words, but at this instant she thought she heard a step behind her.

It is possible that it was an involuntary movement, but her fingers tightened on the trigger, and as the hammer fell a pair of hands seized her from behind.

It was with a strange thrill of utter helplessness that she heard only a sharp click instead of a report, yet with it came a sense of relief that she had not slain her treacherous guide. She neither struggled nor screamed as the pistol was wrenched from her grasp, while the grip of the unseen hands tightened.

"No use ter squirm," said a heavy whisper at her ear.

"Yer a pris'ner to ther Cutsleeves, lady-bird, an' this stuff about yer father an' ther Slap Jack ar' all bosh."

CHAPTER XVII.

VOICES IN THE DISTANCE.

ELLEN CANLEY was a braver girl than the most, and had already shown that, with opportunity, she would not hesitate to defend herself most desperately.

But no chance had she now, as she very well knew the moment she felt the grip close over her arms, and she was not one to take life uselessly.

That consideration saved Honest Hank, for she might still have had time to fire a shot, and it was not likely that a second cartridge would fail her.

Only for an instant did she hold his life in her hands. Then the pistol was wrenched from her grasp. Honest Hank squirmed away, a muffler was twisted around her mouth, and she felt herself raised from the ground and borne along some little distance. Her eyes had become somewhat accustomed to the darkness, and now it seemed to her that she could see certain shadowy forms around her.

"Now, up with her!" exclaimed the same coarse voice she had already heard. "Thar sooner we git outen hyar, ther better. Thar will be lively times ef Jim Canley gits sot on our trail. Him an' Hart Blaine 'u'd furgit the'r diffikilty and jine forces fur onc't. We'll take ther gap-road through the mountains an' be in ther hole long afore daylight."

The trampling of horses' hoofs, low and muffled, followed, and Ellen was flung up in front of a man, who grasped her waist with one arm, and a little procession started off. Her hands had already been bound.

After some time, in which the progress was for the most part gently upward, her captor—or, rather, the one in front of whom she was being carried, spoke in a low tone:

"Lady-bird, we ain't ther sweetest ov angels, but we don't car' ter be rough on er woman, until ther time comes when it hez ter be did. Ef yer thinks yer would breathe easier without this hyar muffler 'round yer chin, an' gives yer word ter keep yer mouth shut, I'll slip her off, tho' it's ag'in' orders. If yer on ther squar' with me, jist nod yer head."

It was not likely that such a favor as this would be offered where there was much danger of its making any difference except in the matter of her personal comfort. Ellen was willing to sacrifice the chances—if there were any—for the sake of present ease, and without hesitation nodded.

The knot behind her head was loosened, and once more she breathed freely.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?"

Her voice was low; but spite of the self-possession that was really marvelous it would waver a little.

"Turn about ar' fa'r play. Yer got ther bulge on some ov ther boys ter-day, an' I reckon ther cap' ar' goin' ter even up. Ther man—er woman ez gits away with er Cutsleeve hez ter answer fur ther life."

"Can there be such brutes in the world as to,

want to take revenge on a woman who has only tried to hold her own when in danger? I will not believe it. There are better hearts even among thieves and cut-throats."

"When a woman acts like er woman she'll find us squar' ez they make 'em; but when she begins ter sling lead 'round she musn't whimper ef she hez ter take a blue pill. Brace up er bit, though I don't reckon ez it's a sure thing fur you er thar wouldn't 'a' bin ser much trouble tuck. It wouldn't been no trouble to er rung yer neck back yander. Unless they means ter hang yer, which they does when they're extree desper't, thar may be sum sorter er show fur yer life yit."

This was cold consolation; but the outlaw was a frank, out-spoken fellow, in spite of his trade.

"Listen," said Ellen, in a whisper even yet lower than she had used. "You must know my father—Colonel Canley. If I have not been deceived he is a wealthy man; and I know that he cares for me. You know these mountain paths. Help me to escape, take me to him, and name your own price. It may be your last chance to escape from a life of crime that sooner or later can have but one ending."

"That's solid, hoss sense, miss; on'y ther facks, ar' ag'in' it. It's likely now, I'll go outen the wet with my boots on; but it er' too late ter pervide ag'in' that. Thar's no goin' back now."

"Do not think so. It is never too late to mend; and the service you could do me would make you friends that would be with you to the death."

"Thet mout be, an' not ermount ter much either. Why, ef I war ter go back on ther Cutsleeves, I'd hev er knife in me throat afore twenty-four hour, even ef I give 'em ther slip ter-night. They'd do it right in Glory Gulch, afore ther hull town; an' no one 'd keet ter take it up. Besides, my sheer ov ther sp'ile es ar tied up in ther bank ar' more ner Jim Canley c'd plank down unless he'd sell ther Slap Jack. What's a thousand dollars er so ter me? An' that's about ther figger he'd think it war 'way up ter offer. Now, leetle miss, you've hed yer fling, whar it couldn't do me no dammdige, yer better simmer down an' take er easy."

"And you think I should be at ease with such an uncertainty hanging over me? When shall I know the worst? After that I may indeed be more unflinching."

"Yer a game one now, lady-bird; an' I'm no end sorry fur yer, ez I likes pluck meself. I don't just reckon, though, thet you'll know much more ner I tole yer till yer sees the capt'n—an' that won't be fur some time. Keep yer lip stiff till then, an' I'll see nothin' hurts yer ez long ez he hain't sed so."

Ellen lapsed into silence.

With this man, who did not seem to be altogether devoid of good points, she could do nothing; of what kind would she find the more abandoned ruffians of the gang? Unless her friends should be able to account for her sudden disappearance, and in some way strike upon the trail, she had nothing to rely upon but her own wit and feeble strength. How far they would go remained to be seen; though she did not altogether lose confidence.

The Cutsleeves seemed to hunt in threes, for there were three in this set. In the narrow roadway they went single file, and Ellen was on the middle horse. It would have been almost impossible for her guard to have fallen in with her offer unless he had first slain his comrades, and for herself she understood that any attempt that she might make would be doubly hopeless.

She could now see around her, in a shadowy sort of way, just managing to make out the forms of the horsemen in front and rear, though on either side still arose a black wall. Evidently there was more light entering the pass or canyon.

The leading rider stopped suddenly.

"Halt!" he said, and held up his hand in an involuntary gesture for silence.

Just as quickly a broad hand went over Ellen's mouth.

"Mebbe yer can't stan' temptation, an' ef yer don't, I'll hev ter wring yer neck, an' all fur nothin'. I s'pect thar's some o' the Sleeves in the distance. Tain't often any other gerloots travels this hyar road at midnight."

Very true this seemed, yet there seemed a doubt in the minds of the three, for they remained motionless as of carved rock. Their quick ears had heard sounds in the distance; and these now grew louder. A horseman was approaching, and was singing, in a coarse, rasping tone.

"So I got drunk again—so I got drunk again;
Me heart was filled with sorrer,
So I got drunk again."

"Curse him! I'd like ter sing that chorus on his throttle. Shall we let him go by, er take him in outen the damp?"

Ellen caught the whisper, and then the warning "Sh!"

"Let him go by. Thar's more lead an' steel 'round that gerloot than thar ar' dust in his buckskin. Watch out that he does go by, and then we'll light out."

"Thar's two ov them, by mighty! Jist listen."

Sure enough, it was easy to make out the footsteps of two horses, though whether there was more than the one rider was past finding out.

The singer kept straight on, roaring out his chorus, and then beginning another verse. He evidently passed at right angles to the course the Cutsleeves were following, and was perfectly unsuspecting of the proximity of any living creatures.

One of the outlaws slid off of his horse, and stole cautiously away.

After a little he returned.

"Thar war two of 'em, an' they rid along like lam's. If they knowed what er close call they had, they'd git up an' dust er heap sight faster. They've took the main trail, an' yer won't hear no more ov 'em."

Again the outlaws moved on. No further comments were made in regard to this chance encounter, but it gave Ellen food for reflection, that lasted her until they came to a halt at the outlaws' retreat.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOWLIN' BILLY DESERTS HIS PATRON.

BILLY BENDER stood outside for a moment after Touch-Me-Not disappeared.

He did not seem to have much hankering after assisting in the interview, even as a possible listener. He walked a step or two away, and then came back, then he repeated the movement, this time going a little further.

If anything his uneasiness increased.

"He's a howlin' hyener, he ar'; an' like ez not they'll be blood on ther floor. But ther young sport kin talk fur hisself; an' ef he's ez good on ther shute ez he ar' with the mawleys he order keep ther books squar' ef they don't show a balance on his side. I ain't hankerin' arter no coffin in mine; but I hate ter go back on ther little man, though he ar' playin' off on me. No Courtly Hammond ar' he; an' what troubles me most ar' that I can't help thinkin' he's me ole side pard, Johnny Ling. That couldn't be, tho'. He'd be fifty year old now—an' he war hung long ago, afore I war a drunken, ole, broken down bummer. I sw'ar I dunno which hed ther wust ov it. What would that woman say ef she'd see me now? She wouldn't know her own work. Sometimes I don't know it meself."

The vagabond seemed in a peculiar humor this night. The sight of the man who so strangely resembled his partner of years before—and some of the things that Touch-Me-Not had said, either at random, or because of some knowledge that no one would have suspected him of possessing—had turned his mind into certain channels in which it did not often wander. A little longer and he might have forgotten what it was that had brought him there. He turned again; and this time he was off for the nearest rum-mill, in search of the liquid poison that might drown his thoughts.

He had taken perhaps a dozen steps, in a sullen, dogged sort of way, when he heard the report of a pistol from within the doctor's shanty.

The sound was a familiar one to his ears; but he gave a great start, like one suddenly aroused from a sleep, and once more he was the man from Black Dam.

"I know'd it, Elizer fishbites I know'd it! Me ole side pard c'u'dn't go in thar 'bout ther bein' music in the air. Oh, he's just lovely on ther shute, he ar'; 'sides bein' ther clean white article in more ways ner one. An' he's sly, too. Den't come a-prancin' outen ther door fur ther fust gerloot ez kims erlong ter p'int out ez ther shootist ez turned ther sawbones's toes up. He'll wait till ther racket ar' over, an' ther band strikes up sumwhar's else."

It happened, too, that though there had been a few foot passengers since Billy took up his station, just now the street was utterly deserted. He ran no apparent risk in waiting near the spot.

But Touch-Me-Not did not come sliding out of the house, though Daddy Bender waited some minutes, in anxious expectation.

"Kin it be that ther boot's on ther other leg? But no. Ef the doctor got ther drop, he'd b'en a-shovelin' ther stiff out afore this. They couldn't 'a' fired together, an' both passed in! I sw'ar it's gettin' cur'us."

Billy crept up quietly to the door and listened.

The lamp was still burning brightly within, but he could detect no sound that would indicate any living occupant of the room.

He knocked faintly, but there was no answer.

"I sw'ar this thing gits cur'usser an' cur'usser. I'll hev ter tech bottom ef I lose er team. Hyar goes."

In accordance with his resolve, Bender softly raised the latch, pushed the door open, and advanced a step within the room.

At first sight the room appeared to be vacant, and Billy, astonished beyond measure, advanced a step or two further.

Then he looked suddenly over his shoulder, and saw the barrel of a pistol aimed squarely at his head.

"What the great horn spoon dew yew want?"

Doctor Sylvanus Coffin was seated in one corner of the room, and had been calmly perusing a newspaper at the time of the interruption.

No sign nor trace was there of the little sport, and so surprised was Mr. Bender that he had no words in readiness to answer the question, which was repeated with a slight variation, and a great deal more emphasis.

"Don't shute, fer gracious sake don't shute. It's on'y ole Billy Bender, ov Black Dam."

"An' what in Jewewsalem krickets dux yer want hyar?"

"I'm lookin' fur me side pardner, Tech-Me-Not—jest the sweetest leetle sport ez ever drew breath, when he ain't got one ov his spells on him. Then, I tell yer, he's a bad man from Chicken Crick, an' don't yer furgit it."

"What hev I got tew dew with yer bad men? Git!"

"But hole on. Whar ar' he. I'll sw'ar he come in hyar, ez he sed he'd partickler biz with you, an' arterward I heard a horn blowin' fur ther war, an' I thort I'd come an' lead him out. I tell yer, when I say come, he's ez peaceable ez a lam'."

"Yew are drunker ner a b'iled owl. No sich man air hyar, er hez bin. Yew better take sum genshian in yer bitters, an' go git some sleep. Ther man with ther poker hez started fur yew, sure."

Bender's earnestness seemed to convince the doctor that he was there with no evil intent, and his manner changed into a contemptuous one, that would have cut the bumper to the quick if he had had any pride.

But he was sadly deficient in that article, and very much in earnest in his search for Touch-Me-Not, of whom he could not see the slightest trace.

He scratched his head, looked around in a puzzled sort of way, and then marched out.

In the street he put his arms akimbo and stared at the shanty in a bewildered sort of way.

"Dog my cats, I can't hev ther man with ther poker; but ef I'd bin really drin' hard I'd hev me doubts. Did I order gone fur him hot; er war it all er ding-blasted dream?"

"It must er bin; fur thar ain't no five foot six ez could 'a' throw'd hisself 'round loose on ther muscle ez I thort he did, unless it war me ole side-pard, Johnny Ling, an' he war hung ten year ago."

"I'll rustle round ter Goodman's an' see ef he won't stand three fingers of bug-juice to ther man what's lost his pard."

Howlin' Billy went hesitatingly up the street; and Dr. Coffin watched him over the paper blind with a scowl on his face.

"I order tuk him in, too," he muttered, "but who'll b'lieve ther drunken cuss?"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PETERSES GO TO GET EVEN ON A SURE THING.

HARDLY had the faint sound of Bender's footsteps died away, when the doctor sprung away from the window, and, moving to the rear of the room, opened a door that there looked out into the night.

"Curse them, if they had been worth their salt no such nonsense as this would have been possible. I suppose they are lying hid away drunk, somewhere, and the boy will have to hunt half over town to find them. If they don't get around before that idiot comes back with half the Gulch at his rear there is going to be trouble in this camp. That is the way, when a man can't do his own work."

The drawl was all gone from his voice, which was harsh and quick, and as he stood there, looking out and listening, he was no longer the same man.

Fortunately for his plans, he did not have long to wait.

First he saw three or four dark shadows, and then he heard the noise made by a number of lightly-falling feet.

"There they are, atlast; or else it's a flank movement—and I should have thought the old fool would have thought of that first thing. Anyhow, Glory Gulch will hardly go back on me now, after all I've done for it. There's not a chief in town that I haven't had under my hands, and I touched them lightly and brought them through."

Three men came up quietly to the door, and on the instant the doctor recognized them.

"So you didn't get him?"

Coffin's tone was dry and sarcastic.

"Blazes, no! He war a streak ov green light-nin'; an' he got us, afore we could put our hands up. It war my fault an' you kin take me head fur a foot-ball, an' I won't wiggle."

"And you call yourself a good man? Three of you tried to handle one little boy, and couldn't keep him out of mischief. About how much do you suppose I can trust you after this?"

"Pile it on. Call me pet names. I desurve it. It war me ez let him coax us inter a fair foot, an' I war ther fust one he put ter sleep on ther floor. He jist mopped Johnny Goodman all up with me, an' then, when we meant bizness, just reguler old bizness, Ante Sam an'

that crowd draw'd, an' tole us ter wait fur a new deal. We waited; fur Ante Sam means sport from ther word go, an' yer tole us ter jump ther game when he come in."

"And what are you going to do about it now?"

"Shute him early in the mornin' an' skip back to ther Bar—er elsewhere. Mebbe, though, you can put us on a better lay-out."

The doctor gave a sharp laugh.

"I might have known you would be afraid to do your work with the Gulch looking at you. Well, I've done the best part of the job, and all you have to do is to finish cleaning it up. The little sport is here, but he won't mop any more floors up. Carry him out and plant him."

"Whar is he?"

Sam Peters started, and looked around as though he was by no means certain of the doctor's meaning, or pleased with the work hinted at.

"There he is. Shove that stuff aside and you will see the prettiest little corpse you ever laid eyes on. Don't fool away your time either, or you will have half of Glory Gulch here assisting at the obsequies. Do you hear me?"

The doctor pointed to a large box at the side of the room, that was apparently full of wood ready for use in the stove. At the sharp command the three moved toward it, and one of the brothers jerked off the split wood, while the other two stood in an attitude that betokened that they were not altogether satisfied with what might follow.

When the fagots had been cast aside, and the doctor coolly held the lamp down, Sam Peters shouted back:

"Why, blame my top-knot, but ther leetle cuss ar' alive!"

"Of course he is. What do you suppose I sent for you for? He's tied, gagged and altogether helpless, or I wouldn't trust him with you. Take him out somewhere to the edge of town, cut his throat, and plant him. Then steer for home."

"We'd better take box an' all, then. Put er lid ov some kind over it, an' ef we meet any sport he can't tell what ther racket ar'. Ef it warn't fur ther size of ther holes it would be jist ez safe ter put him in so. He won't hev time ter think over ther bad men ov Glory Gulch, an' it would save spatterin' things 'round."

"A good idea," responded the doctor, coldly. "And yet I'd like to have a word with him before the funeral. It may be wasting valuable time; but it's worth the chance. Stand back a moment while I give him a last opportunity."

He waved the three men back and stooped over the edge of the box.

"There is no further use of disguise. I recognized you the moment I set eyes on you, but I thought perhaps I might befooled your sharp eyes once more. A twinkle in them gave you away. With you living, there is always danger to me, unless—"

He paused and looked down into the box, holding the lamp so that its beams could play over the face of Touch-Me-Not. In the eyes of the little sport there was a wolfish glitter, that gave token that he would think more than once before coming to terms. Even the contemplation of certain death could neither make him cringe nor wince.

"Exactly, my friend. You think if you could get out and at me? I'll admit that. But you played on my nerve and trusted your eyesight once too often."

"I can't be mistaken in the man, though how you come to be living or where you got the vial of eternal youth, is more than I can make out."

"Granted that I went back on you once. I had my reasons, as you know, but those reasons have vanished—years ago. All you have to do is to forget the past and give me your hand for the future. That never lied in times gone by, and I'll risk all I'm worth on it now. I suppose you drew our pile and spent it long ago, but I'll forgive you that if you can tell me where Gunison's papers are. You know; and I could make a fortune out of them. If you'll come into my game, nod your head and you are a free man."

The doctor spoke in cool, methodical tones. If anything could be told from the sound of a voice, how though it was, he was in most sober, truthful earnest.

No answering motion came from the little sport. His head lay in its uneasy position as still as though it were of carved marble.

"You helped hurt me once—I'm not sure but what you were helping to knot a rope around my neck—but I swear I hate to lose you. It's the last offer. What do you say?"

The shining eyes stared full in the doctor's face, and in them was a red-hot blaze of anger. No sign of weakening was there.

"Then, die. For three reasons you are triply doomed, and I would be a fool to trust you. Carry him off."

The three men advanced, and the cover was tacked loosely on the box.

Then Sam Peters, unaided, slung it over his shoulder and trudged out of the rear door.

"You'll find a spade just outside; bury him deep."

So the doctor whispered, and one of the brothers, as he picked up the utensil, responded in the same tone:

"You bet."

CHAPTER XX.

HOW THE SURE THING WORKED.

THERE could be no question but that Dr. Coffin was thoroughly in earnest.

If he was not, when he turned Touch-Me-Not over to the tender mercies of the three men who hated him worse than death it was certain that his jest would have a deadly ending. Every twinge in their bruises called out for revenge; and the sight of each other's faces was a reminder of the black humiliation that had been put on them.

Of course it was a risk; yet not as much as might at first sight appear.

As Glory Gulch, after the manner of the majority of mining camps, was mostly composed of the long, straggling main street, from the rear of Coffin's house it was almost certain that they could make an unobserved retreat, and within a few hundred yards there were plenty of gashes and prospecting-holes into one of which the man could be dropped, and never found.

Even if the very worst happened and someone met them and discovered the nature of their load the matter could be passed off as a brutal joke; and until Touch-Me-Not could get at his weapons there would be no one to execute justice.

At any rate, for its weight Sam Peters never carried a lighter load.

For some little distance they kept perfect silence. When the murmur of the town had died away behind them, and there seemed little danger of any one overhearing, the brother with the shovel spoke:

"It's a dog-rotted shame that we've got ter do this hyar thing in the dark. Ther Gulch 'll never know how we got even."

"Thet's so; but then ther Gulch 'll hev no call fur gettin' even with us. Ef thar's ary a man ez 'll be axed ter show ther size of his hand it'll be ther populer Doctor Sylvanus Coffin—an' who's goin' ter b'lieve sich nonsense about him? They sot us out on this hyar job, an' thar's nothin' kin ever rub it out that it war too hefty er contrack for us ter carry. Glory Gulch kin think what it dog-gone chooses; but whar's our reputation with ther boys? Blame me ef, fur half er cent, I wouldn't turn him loose, jist ter begin ther hull thing over ag'in on ther square."

"Jist try it. Yer know whar ye'd stan' by ter-morrer night?"

"In course; 'thout I'd buck ag'in' ther hull gang. No. It's got ter be did; but it's er cussed pity that ther's so little comfort in sich er might pirty arrangement. I guess this hyar's about the spot we're aimin' at."

"Ye'r too lazy fur a stroke ov honest work," answered Sam, slumping down the box, with a bang. "Gimme ther spade, an' I'll take keer ov ther sand. You kin try your hand at the hard-pan when we git to it."

"An' it mout be er good plan ter put er knife in him, arter all. Ef he should get out he'd tell er mighty queer story."

"Oh, dry up an' go ter work," said the third, as he seated himself on the box. "I don't half b'lieve he's livin'. Coffin slipped his wind an' put him in hyar ter try yer sand. Yer make more fuss about berryin' er dead gerloot than ef ye'd never see'd a stiff. Fix up yer hole, an' dump him in. Then we'll light out ov town. We's gettin' too well knowd hyar, anyhow."

"Thar's jist erbout hole enuf now ef it war straightened out. About how long is ther cussed box?"

The two stood in a hole which they were vigorously enlarging. The third rose up, took the spade, and made a rude measurement:

"Two foot, seventeen inches, ther length ov ther hammer handle, an' so much!" said Sam, with a rough attempt at a joke.

And then, as the three bent over the completed grave, there was a tearing sound, as the cover flew off and Touch-Me-Not flew out.

It might have been a satisfaction to explain; but time was precious. What difference to the three to know that no one man could draw a knot that would bind Touch-Me-Not's wrists, and that he had been quietly biding his chances.

As he leaped out he caught up his intended coffin, and swinging it over his shoulder, brought it down on the nearest head, with a force that split the bottom into kindling wood.

Reversing the swing, the remnants leveled a second, and at the third Touch-Me-Not sprung, striking as he came.

"I thought I'd use the irons the next time; but the doctor saved your bacon. Three times in one night. If they call you bruisers, a regular fighting man here would be a perfect storm. Ta, ta! When you find me again I'll be trimmed and heeled."

Without waiting to see the result of his blows—he generally knew how hard he sent them—the little sport took to his heels, leaving the three brothers to gather themselves up at leisure, and swear at large. There never was a more ridiculous fiasco than this same high-

pressure game that came to such an unexpected ending.

"I don't care to kill them," soliloquized Touch-Me-Not, as he darted away into the darkness, "but I suppose I'll have to do it. I can't keep this thing going forever, and this was about as narrow a squeak as I ever had. If that scratch on the back of my head had gone a little deeper it would have saved me lots of trouble, I've no doubt. I've got my Derringers yet, but that infernal doctor has my revolvers. I'll call his hand before morning, or I'm a Dutchman."

To reach the Gulch the sport was compelled to make quite a circuit, and to move cautiously lest he should drop into some hidden pitfall, that would swallow him up as completely as the grave would have done which he so narrowly escaped.

Yet in a shorter time than one would have deemed possible he stood once more at the saloon door of Johnny Goodman's ranch.

He halted a moment, just on entrance, and gave a sharp glance around, for he had done enough at and around Glory Gulch to make him plenty of enemies, and in spite of his reckless courage he was not at all anxious to throw away his life.

Although the hour was late the room seemed almost as full as when he left it. There were men at the bar, men at the tables—for at Johnny Goodman's short cards flourished vigorously as the night advanced—and men scattered over the floor.

But above the rest he heard a hoarse voice, that sounded very familiar, and it was mentioning his own name.

"Yes-sir-ree, he's a sport on wheels, an' ez squar' ez they make 'em. Ther man ez sez Tetch-Me Not ain't good medicine hez got ter tackle me, an' I tell yer I ain't no slouch meself. Irish Jimmy seen ther las' round an' them hoofed it back ter Rat Trap. He hez ther mail-bag hisself. An' ther leetle gal with him war a trump, an' don't yer furgit it. So he's been at work hyar? Oh, he's a tearer; an' him an' me could run a city. Whar is ther leetle sharp? Me an' Huckleberry ez jist a-dyin' ter see him; ain't we, Huckleberry?"

"You bet," came the customary chorus.

Tom Gouger and his pard had anticipated the time of their arrival, and as usual the Death-Shot of Shasta, as he delighted to call himself, was blowing his own horn.

"Here's your chance, then," quietly interfered Touch-Me-Not, "for I'm 'round and kicking. I've lost one pard since I've been here, but I've a call to make and I need another. If you don't mind being a little conspicuous, I can vouch for the safety of the affair."

"If you've lost Howlin' Billy," struck in Goodman, "you'll find him in your room. I heard an awful snorin' thar an' jist peeked in. Ther winder war open an' he war layin' on ther bed, on ther broad ov his back, with ther empty bottle in his hand. He ain't drunk—forty-rod strychnine can't throw him—but ef ary man kin wake him afore mornin' I'll stand drinks fur ther town."

"Exactly," answered Touch-Me-Not. "That's his weakness."

"Put it thar, pard, put it thar. Me an' Huckleberry is with yer, even ef it's er waltz up ther flume," Gouger broke in. He had no interest in Howlin' Billy.

"I should smile," came the echo from Huckleberry.

"Then come on. You've only to see fair play, and keep out of the range of bullets."

Together the three went out, and steered straight for Dr. Coffin's shanty.

CHAPTER XXI.

A RESURRECTED SHARP.

DR. COFFIN seemed to be a man of many visitors, both professionally and otherwise. Not half an hour after he had sent Touch-Me-Not out in charge of the three toughs, without any warning the door flew open, and the woman who had come too late for the duel stepped into the room.

Her eyes were glittering, and her face wore a flushed, excited look.

"What infernal plot have you been building up against me and mine? Hartford Blaine has been your friend since the moment when, foot-sore and ragged, you struck this camp; and now you have left him to crawl into some hole in the rocks to die like a dog, while you and your cowardly aid skulk back under cover of the night and claim ignorance of the whole affair. You call yourself a man. Bah! you are a treacherous, slimy, crawling snake!"

The woman hissed the words out with a venom that told how much she was in earnest; but the doctor was neither appalled nor moved. He looked up into the face that might have belonged to a beautiful fiend, and a scornful sneer curled his lips.

"Yew say! The trewth air yew want all the big keards in yewr own hand. When yew see a pardner hes big trumps yew git up an' rile. Hart Blaine will be all right—when I git my cend level."

"Where is he now, villain! I trust you no longer. There may be honor among thieves."

but you are more than a thief. Give him back to me, and we will make our own way, unaided."

"Ska'ssly, me luvly demon. I went in fur Jim Canley's pile, an' I don't step out ontill I git my sheer. Ef yew kin fork it over I'll draw out neow."

He looked at the woman with a leering, impudent gaze, seemingly intent on rousing her anger rather than calming it.

He succeeded, too.

On the instant, with a readiness that the greatest chief in Glory Gulch might have envied, she whipped out two small revolvers, and held them leveled at his head.

"Will you play with a cyclone?" she hissed. "So be it! It is one life or the other! Give me Hartford Blaine's life, or I will have yours."

No one could doubt the doctor's courage after seeing him then.

His elbows were resting on the edge of the little table behind which he sat, and his chin was resting in his hands, and his eyes met hers steadily—though there was a twinkle in them that said he was more amused than alarmed.

"Wall, Isweow! I allers know'd a hornit war a fool; but I didn't think you war so much of either."

"You'll find me hornet enough to leave my sting, without much fooling either. I'll give you three minutes by yonder clock to tell the truth. Your drawl cannot deceive me, either. I know you, now, for a desperate man, who has more than once held his life in his hands; and who would murder me without hesitation or remorse. I shall protect myself, and the moment you move you die."

"Ha, ha! An' ef I should whar would yew be the better? Ef I hev Hart Blaine corraled yew kin bet it's whar no one kin ever find him onless I show ther way. Yew kin blaze away—an' kill tew birds with one shot."

"I do not care. I can see that you have doomed him. He will die under your hands anyway, and it is better to know that at least I have rid the world of you."

"Oh, go on—when the three minutes air up. Mebbe yew'll tell me what's tew become ov the other Ellen? Ther' air tew Ellen Canleys in the field, an' by the time she takes her share out whar will the rest of us kin in?"

The woman gave a start. Though the barrels of her pistols still remained in deadly line, she was more disturbed than would have seemed possible.

"Another Ellen Canley? Villain, you lie. There is no other such woman living; and well you know it."

"Ther' may be tew er three; but I can't sw'ar tew more ner one. She air enough. She kim with the last stage; an' ef she ain't Kunnel Jim Canley's darter, an' can't prove it, I air a bigger liar then I give myself credit fur."

"It is false! James Canley has no living daughter. I should know. The child died long before Ellen—"

"That will do. I onderstand. But mebbe it won't be so easy ter prove. It don't make ser much difference whar ov tew sisters one kicks ther bucket, it mout be hard, jist in Glory Gulch, ter tell which one it was. But when a likely young gal kims ter jine her father, ef he's satisfied, ther rest ov ther world ginnerally knocks under. An' this happens tew be ther darter ov another wife."

"But it cannot be. How could he have hidden her away for all these years? His daughter—my daughter, then. Ha, ha!"

"I reckon yer will give me three minnits more grace. Yew hev'n't half got tew ther bottom ov my budgit."

"Yes, I see—unless you are telling a most monstrous lie—that I cannot do without you."

She put away her pistols, and sat down on the rude stool upon the other side of the table.

"What do you mean to do about it? I believe your story, for I have seen the girl herself. Strange that I did not recognize her face."

"Who knows? Mebbe ef I c'u'd fascinate her, an' make her Missus Coffin it would be the best way out fur me. Then, when I was a dash-in', young widower—who knows?"

Once more he leered at the woman in a most provoking way, but she did not see it. She was studying her own chances.

"And if everything else fails?"

She put the question deliberately, and waited coldly for her answer. By it might, perhaps, be determined how deeply he was in earnest.

"Ef this firm holds together, an' there's nothin' else fur it, she will—re-tire."

"But that may not be so easy. It is one thing to get rid of a warring man, who holds his life in his hand for any one to snatch at; and another to remove a handsome young girl, for whom all the sympathies of the rude miners, and rich mine-owners, would be excited. Canley's find, of which he has taken such care to say but little, is worth a fight for—there maybe millions in it. But the half may be better than the whole; and no harm must come to the girl—for the present."

"Have yew any perticular centerest in her?"

"Only so far as concerns my own safety. It is well we struck when we did; a day or two

longer might have been too late. Tell me how Hart Blaine is, say that he lives, that he is not in danger, and that you have only hidden him away to save him possible trouble, and I will forget all my doubts. We will take possession of the Slap Jack to-morrow morning. The girl will only be a feather in my hands."

"I thort yew would kim ter sense. I kin fetch Blaine threw O. K., an' yew hev s'uthin' else ter dew than moonin' reound his bed. That's a good girl. Git tew work. I hev ther gang tew plant in the Slap Jack, an' ef Jim Canley's ghost er darter kin git 'em out they'll beat me."

"And can they protect me? Was not the assault made on me to-night part of your scheme, of which you are only letting me see the shiny side? If you were only not too great a villain to be trusted!"

"Ther's a pair on us. Which assault air those?"

In a few words she recounted the sudden attack made when she was spying upon Colonel Canley and his friend, and how the latter had come to her assistance.

As she suppressed most of the conversation she had had with the three, the attack had no evident explanation, and the doctor appeared as much puzzled as herself.

"Yer kin expect nothin' else but tew kim tew grief of yew sashay 'round this camp at all sorts of unchristian hours. Ef yew can't trust me, yew had better drop the bizziness. I kin run it thru without yew."

"Ah! Perhaps I had better take as my partner the young man who struck in because I was a woman. Ellen Canley, he and I could hold the mine against the best of you—if it was not for Hartford."

"Go look fur 'em if yew think so. Hartford is whar he kin do no mischief; the young gal air provided fur; an' Tetch-Me-Not, ther gay little sport—"

"What of him?"

"He air dead."

"You lie!"

With his quick, agile step, Touch-Me-Not slipped through the doorway, his derringers cocked and at a ready.

"No foolishness, my dear doctor; but the fact is, I had to come back from the happy hunting-grounds to hunt up my sixes that I fancy I dropped somewhere around here. You wouldn't have a man prospecting around over the range without being fully heeled?"

The advent of the little sport was more than a surprise—for the moment it was a terror.

He came with the drop, and if he meant shoot, nothing on earth could save the two; for, though he spoke to Coffin, he had both covered.

"What dew yew mean?"

The doctor recovered something of his wits, and for the first thing tried to temporize.

"I mean that there's some game going on here that I've no call to chip into yet, because no one's dealt me a hand. That's all right. Go on with your cattle-show. But I do mean that if you don't shell out the revolvers that I left here when I made my other call, there'll be, in about five seconds, the dearest doctor that ever turned his toes up in Southeastern Arizona. There's not such another set of tools in the Territory, and the way things look I'm going to need them. You understand?"

The doctor understood. It made no difference what kind of a man he was, he could do nothing else; and he had peculiar skill in reading the eyes of an irate man, no matter how smoothly he might speak.

He did not move a finger, but nodded with his head.

"In yander box thar's a pair of tewels some one left. Ef they're yewrn, take 'em an' go."

"Ha, ha! So you'd play that game on me? Oh, do you take me for a fool? Go for them, Gouger, and if they are the Simon-pure articles, we'll leave this little tea-party to meditate over their brewings."

A dark shade of disappointment swept over the doctor's face, for he had hoped that Touch-Me-Not was alone; and the squat, sturdy rough that slouched across the floor was very different backing from rum-soaked Howlin' Billy.

"They're yourn, pard; I'll sw'ar ter it, acos' I've looked inter ther' nozzles afore, an' knows 'em by heart. Ye'r' heeled, now, fur ther war-path, so I guess we'd better start."

"Da-da!" said Touch-Me-Not lightly, to the doctor.

"When you don't expect me I'm generally around. It's time now to find out what has become of little Ellen. When I discover I'll let you know."

This time no chance for the drop did the doctor have for Touch-Me-Not, following Gouger, backed to the door, and then suddenly disappeared.

CHAPTER XXII.

VARIOUS PROMINENT CITIZENS TAKE A HAND.

As the reader may have already guessed, Colonel James Canley had not been a personally popular man at Glory Gulch.

He had come there with the rush—and had prospered.

That was against him with a good many.

If it had been "come easy, go easy," with him it might have been different, but with prosperity he had seemed to change. He had always been a silent man, so that no one knew where he had come from, or anything of his past life; but at first he had mixed somewhat freely with the rougher elements and even made some movements toward founding a private grave-yard, and the like.

After a time all that was changed.

He had little to say, and devoted himself to work with grim energy. Glory Gulch saw but little of him of late, for almost the whole of his time was spent at the Slap Jack, where he had men to work for him; and where it was suspected that he had made a big strike.

The particulars of that he kept to himself.

Hartford Blaine, on the contrary, had been a popular man from the very first day he set foot inside of the camp and shot Alligator Abe through and through.

He was a different sort of man altogether. Though always well dressed, and apt to be domineering in his ways, he knew how to take right hold of the popular heart. He could spend more money in a night, at The Blizzard, than Colonel Canley could drop in the whole town in a week; and he put the greater part of it where it would do the most good.

Very little work did Hart Blaine do that was harder than shuffling a pack of cards, and his strikes generally seemed to be made in pockets that were above rather than beneath the surface of the soil. For all that he was not distinctly classed as a gambler, for it was generally understood that he was a speculator, who had come to the Gulch on private business, the exact nature of which had never been divulged.

One thing was certain.

A finer pistol-shot than Hart Blaine never had shown his skill to the people of Glory Gulch. Although the thing was kept pretty quiet, yet there had been a rumor in the camp that he and Canley had had a flare up, and the result was that the betting was three to one, and few takers, that when they came together Blaine would get away with the colonel's luggage.

And there was a kind of secret hope in the hearts of the majority of the betters that Blaine would, for once, play for keeps.

So far he had gone in to cripple, and had displayed the most wonderful ingenuity in making holes and then absolutely pinning the life just inside.

The morning after the occurrences just related, there were various rumors afloat that both startled and perplexed the good people of the Gulch.

The report seemed to have originated at Johnny Goodman's and The Blizzard, and in the beginning amounted to the report that the affair between Blaine and Jim Canley had come off, in a quiet, formal way, without any chance for advantages, and that both men had been "salivated."

Moreover, the seconds of both men were missing.

The supposition was that these latter had buried their principals and lit out. But why they should have done so unless there had been foul play of some kind no one attempted to explain.

This was startling enough; but a little later there was an addition that increased both the mystery and the excitement of the affair.

It was that the trouble had originated about Blaine's sister, who was Canley's deserted wife; that the woman was in Glory Gulch, with full proof of her position, and that, backed by a dozen solid fighting men, she had that morning taken possession of her husband's effects, including the Slap Jack, and that she intended to administer on his effects after the usual Western fashion.

That operation in Glory Gulch was reduced to the simplest stage of Western jurisprudence. There was no probate judge or other elective officer to claim a moiety; all business being done on a cash basis, there were no recognized debts to be paid; and the administrator always corraled the whole estate.

Then they began to remember the handsome, black-eyed woman who had been stopping at Goodman's for a week, and who had been seen several times in conference with Blaine, and once or twice with Canley, who had been prospecting around the burg in a manner that had excited considerable attention, and whose presence had been viewed with reasonable suspicion by a number of the inhabitants, who had wondered what sort of a lay-out she was looking after.

There were various little indignation meetings held around at the different head-quarters, that day.

Although, as Alligator Abe expressed it, the Gulch didn't "want ter buck ag'in' a woman—ef it war Hart Blaine's sister—onless everything war fa'r an' squar' it u'd be er shame ter see all them richness goin' ter a clean outsider. Suthin' orter be did."

"What ner thunder yer goin' ter do about it?" growled Sandy Bob, a man who never worked until he had his choice between that and starvation. "It ar' jist er simple robbin' ov us

desarvin' ones; an' they say ther Slap Jack's good fur er millyon."

"Wot interest c'u'd you hev in it anyway?" asked another. "You never hit er pick in ther drift, an' the on'y time yer ever kim 'round thar Kunnel Canley, he jist booted yer clean outen sight. A man wot won't either work ner fout orter go soak his head till he dries up."

This was a side shot, from a man who had worked in the mine, but had managed to worm into a little claim of his own. He could not make much more than wages at it; but it gave him the right to swell a little; and he didn't like Sandy Bob anyhow.

But such remarks as these stirred up public feeling until there was an informal meeting that by its very size attracted a good share of the men in town.

After some little talk, Alligator Abe, who had been cogitating over Sandy Bob's question of what was to be done about it, proposed an answer.

"I'll tell yer, men, jist what I moves be did. Ef this hyar thing ar' fa'r an' hands on ther boord, it ar' all right. But ef this hyar ar' a gouge game, sot up on ther Gulch ter play 'em fur flats, why thar's too much coin in it ter 'low it ter go through. I moves ther be a committee 'pointed by this hyar court ter 'zamin inter ther claims of this hyar female. Ef et's O. K., hunkus dorus, lett'er went. Ef she can't show clean papers give her the big bounce, an' we'll run ther Slap Jack fur ther benefit ov ther town. It's wuth it, an' don't you disremember."

Though the case was put in the plainest of words, there was a solid bed rock to the argument that pleased the crowd, so that there was a chorus of affirmative voices, though Sandy Bob did sneeringly remark:

"I guess ez how you figgers on bein' chief ov that committee, an' if she can't show er clean bill then it'll be 'cos she ain't sense enuf ter jingle er couple ov slugs 'round yer head."

A few, who heard this shrewd criticism, laughed approvingly, but before any one else could speak Alligator Abe got in his answer:

"Feller-citerzens: I perfess ter be a squar' man, full ov sand, an' er leetle quick on ther shute. I war a boss till Hart Blaine plugged me, an' sence that I've sung slightly small, spendin' ther most ov my time gittin' well. I've got so fur on ther road thet I'd scrub this hyar street up with Sandy Bob's carkiss, ef it warn't fur disturbin' ther quiet ov a publick meetin' settlin' with er no 'count gerloot as couldn't hit ther side ov ther Pilgrims' Rest at two rod. If I war on ther committee, you'd hev er man ez duckats couldn't buy ner bullits frighten; but I ain't ther kind yer want. My head's level 'n' solid, but it ain't ther breadth fur ther subjeck. Thar ar' a man in camp ez I kin reckermend fur ther work, an' what he sez you kin gamble on fur gospel. I perpose, fur that committee, Dr. Coffin—ez squar' a man ez ever nussed a sick lam' through er slit in his chist, er a bad spell ov ther fever."

The affirmative chorus that arose was this time stronger than ever. Even Sandy Bob did not care to throw straws in the way of the rising storm of approval.

No other name could have been suggested that would have enlisted the same amount of sympathy.

"He's ther man!"

"Ef thar's any skull-duggery he'll see right through it. I tell yer he's er boss ter see what's under ther rifle."

"Send him along. He'll give fair play; an' what he sez we'll sw'ar to."

"Then, feller-citerzens, I move this hyar meetin' stan's 'journed till five er'clock, ter h'ar ther doctor's report. Ef Major Bang an' Dutch Pete 'll go 'long, I'm ready ter hunt Coffin up an' tell him what dooty this hyar burg hes put on his shoulders."

No difficulty did the designated pair make, and with the departure of the trio the "court" for the most part dispersed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A LITTLE MERCY—OR WHAT?

ELLEN CANLEY, once satisfied that force nor reason, such as she had to offer, could help her, accepted her fate with as much coolness as possible.

There was no doubt in her mind as to what was her destination.

The Cutsleeves—of whom she had heard so often during the latter part of her journey—had taken her captive, as they had done others before her. What their intentions were was a very solemn question.

If they intended to hold her for a ransom, of course it was not so bad, because they would scarcely hold her much beyond what they imagined was her actual cost value, which she believed her father would cheerfully pay if there was no better way.

If, as one of her captors had informed her, they had taken her to enact some terrible revenge for the part she had taken in repulsing their attack on the stage, then she might expect something horrible enough.

Fortunately she could not fathom the possible depths of wickedness in the hearts of such

men as the Cutsleeves; and being young and brave hope was strong within her. She went quietly to sleep on a rude couch inside of a ruder hut. What was the exact nature of her surroundings she was unable to guess until the next morning.

Then she had another surprise. The bolts that secured the stout door upon the outside were thrust back, the door opened, and into the room peered a man, who was evidently one of the outlaws.

Quite picturesque he appeared.

He was dressed in black corduroy pants, of a fineness and gloss that resembled velvet, a red shirt with a black slash of velvet across the left sleeve, top-boots that reached well up toward the thigh, and a broad-brimmed black sombrero, one side of which was looped up with a large golden star. Over his face was a black mask such as the gang always wore on their marauding expeditions.

This person touched his hat with a rather graceful gesture that resembled a military salute.

Then he spoke in what might be a disguised, but was certainly a pleasant voice:

"There's no use tryin' ter fool yer, miss; but till ther Cutsleeves decide what's goin' ter be done in your case we'll try ter treat yer square. You'll hev yer breakfast in a minute er so, an' I'd advise yer ter eat hearty. After that, if yer feel like bein' er good angil—ez I sh'd say yer would frum yer face—ther's a chance we'll give yer at a man ez has fallen inter our hands, an' may be wuth ther nussin'."

"More likely it is one of your gang who fell under the bullets of one of my friends," Ellen answered boldly. "It would be like you to ask me to nurse him."

"An' why shouldn't we ax yer ter clean up whar yer hadn't finished yer work? There's mighty few women 'd be so ready on ther shoot, er wouldn't be glad fur a chance ter save ther life ov a human bein'. Ef ther wust sort ov a man got mashed in a stamp-mill er blow'd up in a blast you'd break yer neck ter help him, but when a christyun scholar an' gentleman, ef he happens ter be a road-agent, in the line ov biz gits drilled full ernuff ov holes fur a skimmer he ain't fit ter wipe ole shoes with. Well, he ain't sich. Somebody give it to him through ther lungs, an' we took him in outen sheer goodness ov heart. He'll die ef he don't git good nussin'."

"Oh, if I can be of any use I am ready. Since I must be here find work for my hands so that my head will forget. Yet must I stay—and for how long?"

A slight chuckle proceeded from under the mask.

"Thet's ther way ov weemen. They can't ax one question at a time ter save 'em. Don't make no differens—don't know anything about it. Hyer comes yer breakfast things. When yer through I'll let yer see ther patient."

The man stepped aside sufficiently to allow a woman to enter the cell-like room.

She was a grizzly, hard-featured, weather-beaten woman, of Mexican birth, who looked as though her life had been one of toil and submission. In her eyes there was no spark of either interest or sympathy, but she set down a wooden platter well filled with viands; and then drew back to the door with her arms crossed, and her hand resting on the long knife that hung at her waist. Without doubt she knew well enough how to use the weapon, though there was more of watchfulness than threat in her position.

As Ellen had missed her supper the evening before, it was not so unnatural that the sight and smell of the really well-prepared victuals should arouse a very fair appetite, and that she should do ample justice to the meal that was set before her.

She tried her attendant with several questions, but the weather-beaten face put on a stolid look, and the only answer given was:

"No understand Americanos."

When she had finished, the masked man reappeared at the door.

"We ain't trustin' yer an artom. Ef yer kin git erway with ther Cutsleeves, it's ther wus fur us, an' ther better fur you, though it's a mighty onhealthy thing ter try. Ther hospittle ar' stronger ner this, an' better guarded, so I warns yer not ter try on any anticks. Them guards shoots mighty straight. But ef yer ready ter take hold, yer kin kim right erlong."

"Any change will be for the better," said Ellen, recklessly, and she raised from her seat on the bed to follow.

"Erlow me, then. We don't hev no outsiders hyer, wanderin' 'round, takin' notes."

Very skillfully he adjusted a scarf around her eyes.

"Now, hold up them leetle hands o' yourn. Ef yer deal a squar' game yer must hev er flyer. Whar thar's no limit, some durn'd fool allers comes along, an' bu'sts ther bank wide open on ther turn."

Evidently the outlaw did not intend to give her any chance either to escape or to find out more than was necessary about the haunts of the Cutsleeves—a spot so skillfully concealed, and so well guarded, that, as yet, no one had

ever been able to find it, though soldiers and vigilantes had searched for it often enough.

The young girl did not draw back, or evince any signs of fear, as she felt a thong of green hide twisted around her wrists. The very care used convinced her that foul play was not intended.

Had her life been wanted, there was nothing to hinder the outlaws from taking it at their will.

Guiding her by a hanging end of the thong, the outlaw led Ellen from the prison hut, and strode away.

Where she was she could only guess; but it seemed to her that she was on a hill-side, with a deep valley below her, and that her feet trod on a rocky ledge that wound across the face of the mountain.

Quite a little distance was traversed before they turned sharply to the left.

Then she knew by the sound of their footfalls that they had entered a cavern.

"You've nerve fur a dozen," the road-agent said, admiringly, at last.

"You're the on'y gal ez could take that trip 'thout a shudder. Fur pure pluck you take ther cake. But it's about over now, an' hyer you are."

He unloosened the thong as he spoke, removed the bandage from her eyes, and turning toward a low bed, on which she could see the figure of a man, he added:

"An' thar's yer man."

"Can you tell me who he is?" Ellen asked, as she peered around, striving to pierce the darkness of the cave-like apartment.

"I ain't sure, but some un sed it war Kurnel Jim Canley, ov Glory Gulch. Him ez ar' workin' in ther Slap-Jack shaft."

CHAPTER XXIV.

ELLEN FINDS A FRIEND.

At the, to her, astounding declaration, Ellen was too much amazed to make any outcry.

She stood gazing at the bed with dilating eyes and tied tongue.

She knew very little of this father except by his letters, but she had learned to love him from the fact that she knew that more than once he sacrificed himself for her. The first thought was that he had made some desperate effort to rescue her, and had so been thrown into this strait.

The wounded man moved faintly, but did not seem to notice her presence, and with clinched hands she waited to regain her presence of mind.

Would it be worth while to reveal her identity to her father, whose only chance might be in keeping quiet in mind as well as body? Of course, whatever this outlaw might know, some one of the Cutsleeves knew of her relationship to this man. The nature of the trap that had been laid for her, and into which she had so readily fallen, convinced her of that.

Through the eyelets of his mask the outlaw watched her narrowly.

He saw there was some sort of a struggle taking place in her mind; and perhaps he understood it. It was only when Ellen had had time to brace herself up that he spoke.

"You won't have nothin' to do but ter take keer ov him, an' what yer want kin be told ther guard at ther door thar. Ef it's to be had you'll git it, fur when we ain't in ther line ov bizness us Cutsleeves ar' ther softest-hearted cusses yer ever seen. When we ar'—yer mout ez well buck erg'in' a nest ov roarin' grizzlies. Don't yer go fur gettin' inter trouble, fur I'll sw'ar it'll on'y cost yer life."

"It is not very likely I will be so foolish. I see no avenue of escape for me to try."

"No. Ther's rock all round, 'cept ther winder an' door. Ther's grates on one an' lock on t'other. Ef yer gits outside ther's a man with er rifle that'll shoot sure. Ef yer got er leetle funder—Waugh!"

There was evidently something worse in reserve, the nature of which he did not care to tell. Perhaps the threat was more impressive from the unknown terror it indicated.

"No need to threaten. When I get tired of life I can dash my brains out on the bars; I certainly can get no further; but tell me, how long must this suspense last? How long must I remain ignorant of the fate in store for me?"

"Yer axed that afore. I dunno; an' you won't know till ther capt'n comes back. He's went over ther mount'ns. Mebbe he'll be 'round in er week—mebbe not. You'll know soon enuf when he gits back. That's enough chin-chin. Yer kin sit down thar till he wakes up, an' Burke kin git outen this. So-long! Kim erlong, Burke."

Another outlaw came into sight. He had been crouched on a low bench, and Ellen had not hitherto noticed him. He, too, was masked; but it was evident that he was well pleased to be relieved from his unpleasant duty. Without a word he slouched across the floor and disappeared.

"But what am I to do?"

After all she had only a hazy idea of what nursing this sick man was like—this wounded

father whom she actually was afraid to face for fear that the very sight of her might prove fatal.

"I reckon yer can't do much ov anything till the doctor kims."

"The doctor?"

"You bet. We ain't sich hard-hearted cusses as yer think. When we takes up er case we goes ther hull hog. You kin trust a doctor an' a priest. Ther lawyers ar' all right long ez yer payin' 'em more money ner any one else; but when ther's a higher bid ag'in' yer—look out."

After thus moralizing the man gave her a few simple directions, pointed out a bucket of water and a cup, and then departed.

Yet he turned at the door and cast one last glance at her as she stole on tip-toe to the bed. The sight of her face satisfied him. He nodded, turned, and went out.

If she had believed the statement that, with good nursing, this man would get well, she began to doubt it now, as she bent over him.

But she had had time to gain control of her nerves, and did not intend to give way.

He lay in what was more of a stupor than a doze. Occasionally his lips moved, and he uttered a low whisper.

Bending over the daughter distinguished one word.

"Ellen!"

She put her cool hand on his forehead, and the touch seemed to have a calming effect. Then she wiped a touch of froth away from his lips and sunk upon her knees by his bedside.

After a little he opened his eyes and whispered:

"Where am I, and who are you?"

"Do not talk. Some miners found you, wounded in the breast, and brought you here. Then they came for me to nurse you. I know little about you yet, but they tell me they have sent for a doctor, and that he soon will be here."

The caution was needless since the man did not speak again. His eyes closed, and he once more lapsed into the stupor out of which he had only momentarily roused.

Ellen still crouched, listening to his breathing, and wondering whether it was the result of his wound, or the use of the narcotics that she thought she could detect upon his breath, that kept him in his semi-sensible condition.

It was a lonely and a tiresome vigil, since she was all alone with the wounded man, for whom she could do nothing.

Once or twice she arose and moved silently about the gloomy, vault-like room; but her explorations ended in almost nothing. Scant was the furniture.

There was the bed on which the wounded man was reposing, a rough table and a bench.

The ceiling was high, and the grated window was above her reach. Ellen could have climbed up to it, but put that off to some more convenient season. She was not yet ready to try to escape, even if opportunity offered itself.

Finally she resigned herself to watching, burying her chin in her hands, and wondering whether the man on the bed could be her father.

Time crawled on very slowly. An hour had scarcely passed, and yet it seemed like a dozen. Then she heard a low-voiced challenge without, below the window. A few moments later the door opened, and an outlaw entered; and following him came a man whom she rightly judged to be the doctor.

The Cutsleeves were as careful with him as they had been with her. The same scarf was around his eyes, and his arms were pinioned together at the wrists.

He paid no attention to the girlish figure crouching in the shadow, but went at his patient with the air of a virtuoso.

"The man ez patched him up waz no slouch; but he's in a bad way. Nip an' tuck, an' ther dog a leetle ahead. Can't berry him in this hole. Take him intew sunlight an' fresh air, nuss him well, an' he'll get through. Funny dogs these. Cut yer throat like winkin', an' reesk the'r own few save yer when in trouble."

The doctor talked to himself as he examined the patient. Then he turned hastily to the masked man who stood behind him.

"I'll hev tew watch him a bit, tew see what's bin done. Yew kin lock ther door, an' leave me an hour. Then I must git."

"Yer purty strong spoken, doctor, but yer ther clean corn, an' we kin risk yer. But don't yer try ary frolicsome games 'round hyar, I'll give yer warnin'! Yer pulled ther cap'n through, but that's no reason why yer sh'd put our necks in a noose. Don't say too much to that young heifer."

The doctor gave a start.

"Ah, yaas! I'd a'ar furgot. Yer said ther' was a gal 'round ter dew ther nussin'. I'll hev ter tell her what I expect, an' then she may go. I ain't much use fur sich."

The outlaw laughed, and then turning, walked away. He had no particular desire to assist in the dressing of the wounds of Colonel Canley.

Certainly the doctor's fingers were skillful, and he did not hesitate to use them. Though Ellen leaned forward with painful eagerness, she scarcely got a glimpse of the little, round

blue spot that marked where the bullet had almost got away with her father's life.

All danger, at least of external hemorrhage, was apparently over. What was going on inside she wished that she knew.

As the doctor was silent while he worked, she ventured a faint question.

"Help me turn the man over, easy like. Mebbe I kin tell more when I see his back. I guess it mout be wuss."

Between them they turned the unresisting colonel over.

"Ah!" said the doctor, in a tone of satisfaction. "I've got him."

"What?"

Ellen grew more in earnest; but the doctor did not answer her.

Instead he took out a lancet, and made a sharp thrust into the flesh, that scarcely quivered.

Then he thrust his finger into the incision, and drew out the ragged, battered bullet.

"Mebbe it warn't doin' any hurt thar; but he'll feel heap better with it out. It went right threw him, but if we kin keep ther fever down he'll git along. I'll fix that though. I'm sartin death on fevers. Now, who be yew?"

There seemed to be a great deal of blunt honesty about this man, and on the spur of the moment Ellen trusted him.

"I am Ellen Canley, and as I understand and believe, this gentleman's daughter, though we have been separated for years. It is very strange; but I was captured by the Cutsleeves last night, being lured from Glory Gulch, when I had just arrived. They asked me to nurse a wounded man, whom they had picked up; and though I could not understand how men who had shown such brutal hate to me could have soft enough hearts to aid a strange man, in mortal danger, yet I consented. They brought me to him not long ago; and from what they said I found that the wounded man was my father. Can you tell me any more of this mystery?"

"I kin—at least a leetle. He waz throwed in a dewel with Hart Blaine, last night; an' while the others waz pokin' at Blaine, who also got it purty solid, ther kunnel must ov wandered away, an' got picked up. Ther man az should 'a' stood by him got inter sum outside foolishness an' never seen him go. Mebbe that war a put-up job—mebbe it wa'n't. I don't say. But we've got him now, an' you'll pull him threw."

"And afterward? What will they do with him?"

"Oh, they'll turn him loose. They're square ez a die, these roosters be. When they rob they rob, an' when they bate they bate; but they don't do good er evil by halves."

"And then, what will become of me?"

"That's somethin' else. But by Jehoshophat! Nol. They shan't hurt a hair ov yer head if I kin help it. Trust in Dr. Coffin, an' heur's his hand on it."

The doctor spoke in heat, at the last, as if white with a sudden resolve and thrust out a hand, which was neither large nor weather-beaten. As her own hand fell into it, one of the Cutsleeves, thrusting his head into the door exclaimed:

"Time's up, doctor! Say yer last say, an' come on!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A SCOUT IN THE CANYONS.

AS Touch-Me-Not and his two strangely made friends moved away from the doctor's office, after their short and satisfactory interview, Gouger broke the silence.

"Say, sport; I heard yer shoot off suthin' 'bout er gal—Ellen Canley I think yer called her. Ef I don't disremember that war ther name ov ther bit ov caliker ez klm in with yer on ther hearse. Yer don't mean ter say she ar' missin' a'ready?"

"I do, and there's some foul play about it, or I am more mistaken than I usually get."

"That ar' bad. I don't ginerally cotton ter pettycoats meself, an' when one ov 'em slings er shadder acrost my path she mostly makes powerful bad medercin' fur me; but this un war jist er compound ov rock sugar an' flood lightnin'—suthin' like er leetle gal I run ag'in' once on ther trail ter Eden City, on'y more so. I took right down to her, an' Huckleberry, he war jist dead gone bu'sted on her—all, yer knows, in er quiet, reespectable sorter way. So, ez friends, jest reel off ther natur' ov ther trouble, an' ef thar's any way fur two roarin' cinnermons ter climb ther tree you kin count us in."

"That is the way I like to hear it. You talk lots; but you mean a heap of what you say, and I don't mind letting you get a peep at the ground floor, as I see it. I've struck a nice nest of trouble in this burg, and I sha'n't go a step further until I see it all through. There's another Ellen Canley around—the woman in the doctor's shop—and Colonel Jim Canley got it through the lungs this morning. There's rocks lying about loose, somewhere, that ought to belong to our little woman; and there's a plot to gather her shekels in. It won't win though, see if it does."

"I'll bet ye'r right. Ef thar's any bloody

place 'tates patrollin' 'round ter git away with her luggage you pint 'em out; an' me an' Huckleberry'll mount 'em. Now give us er leetle finer pints on ther game. Whar d'yer think she's gone ter?"

"That's what I want to find out. I've got it down dead level that that lantern-jawed doctor, who is no Yankee at all, has a hand in the game; but what is the size of it, I'll have to call it to see. I left her at Johnny Goodman's for an hour or so, and when I got back, I found that she had been coaxed away. That's the end of her."

"Say. Yer don't s'pose ther agents could hev a hand in? They'll be after you, heavy; an' they mout want ter squar' it up with her."

"That's another idea, that never struck me. They might have a hand in it—by heavens, yes! But they had help from the town, and that help I want to find for a starter. After that, if I can't strike her trail, she will need a better friend, that's all."

"Cinnermon bars an' painters, we kin put yer on ther trail now—an' take it right long with yer. Ha, ha! Ef ther thort ther boss trailer ov Shaster c'u'd be fooled that way, they can't black boots ter make er shine. I heerd 'em, 'long back in ther canyon, afore we struck ther town. Three men a-hossback, an' a gal. That war ther lay-out, I'll bet er mustang an' saddle ag'in' er rangin' kiote? How's that, Huckleberry?"

"Ef you say so I say so; an' ef you warn't hyar, I'd swar to it."

Huckleberry's echo was a little longer than his customary "You bet," though he spoke without the enthusiasm of his pard.

Touch-Me-Not did not notice that. He was already full of the revelation that Gouger had made.

"You sure of that? It's darker than the ten of spades there, and you couldn't tell three men from a hole in the ground at that hour of the night."

"It don't take much boss sense ter climb er chimbley, it's all main stren'th an' o'hardness. Ef they hedn't stopped so short when they heerd me shout, I wouldn't 'a' keered; but I know'd they warn't standin' thar listenin' ter my singin', so I rid on about half er mile, an' then run back an' marked ther spot."

"Good enough, then. We'll let these sharps in town play ther hands out, and to morrow morning bright and early we'll go gunning for road-agents, and hunting up the trail of the lost girl."

This was the way it happened that the next morning Touch-Me-Not and Tom Gouger slipped out of camp at daybreak, leaving Huckleberry behind to watch the drift of public opinion and pick up any stray points.

The two found the trail with less trouble than Touch-Me-Not had expected. When he was on it he could see no actual signs, for a time, though Gouger asserted that it was a darned sight plainer than the nose on his face.

By-and-by they picked up a crumpled glove.

"Mebbe yer ain't gettin' warm now? That wur dropped by me an' Huckleberry, mebbe? Oh, yes. You bet. Fits me finger like erebarm."

He held the delicate little article up, and uttered a hoarse, cavernous laugh.

Touch-Me-Not nodded.

"I don't doubt you. All I said was that I could not see the tracks that you said were so plain. And I've pretty sharpeyes, too."

"Yer make me laff. It's one thing ter git ther drop on er slouch like me, an' another ter tell whether a 'skeeter sot on er log las' week, er week afore last. Now hyar, yer see, ar' ther track ov er wood tick, an' yonder's ther trail ov er mount'in-flea. They both went 'long afore dew fell las' night. Ther flea hed er knapsack on his back and ther tick kerried er fourteen-inch bowle."

Gouger, as he reeled off this extraordinary statement, looked at his companion and grinned.

"I'll swear, Gouger, I believe you lie to hear yourself lie. At any rate you don't expect to stuff me with your yarns. I can see that there is a natural roadway through this fissure, and it's more than likely it was traveled by the Cutsleeves. That's good enough. We'll follow it and see where it leads to. Meantime, we're more interested in road-agents than wood-ticks, mountain-fleas or musketoes. If we stumble across them I'll have a chance to see something of your shooting. You don't seem to get it in very often, but when you do get it in they say it always counts."

Gouger raised his eyebrows, but made no verbal answer. He was a regular Captain Blow Hard, and knew it, yet there was a rude chivalry about him at times and more than one town had owned him, backed as he always was by Huckleberry, as a a chief.

It may have been that he had seen horses' tracks on the rocky floor of the fissure; but his eyesight must have failed somewhat, since, before the morning was over he had to own that he was totally at a loss. The crevice had widened into a canyon, then narrowed into a gash, and finally ended abruptly in a cul-de-sac.

They looked this way and that; but the wood-tick had not got that far, and the mountain-flea had gone another way.

"They might have climbed a rope, and drawn the cord up after them," said Touch-Me-Not, looking thoughtfully up the face of the perpendicular wall of rock just in front of him.

"Hosses an' all. That's just ther way they did it. I wouldn't 'a' thunk it; but that's er heap ter learn out hyar."

"Oh, say! This may be fun and frolic with you, but it's just old business with me. We've missed it somewhere along the canyon, as we might have expected. We'll have to hark back, and see if we can't find the right trail. There's one that heads up the side of the canyon somewhere, and takes on into the heart of the mountains."

"And ef these Cutsleeve gerloots hed bin tendin' ter ther biz, they'd bin a-watchin' us from it, an' plugged us both. They ain't much ercount on war, er else ther capt'n ain't at hum. We'd better go back keerful like, for they may be thar now. An' ef we see any one of ther gang, I guess we'll pull an' let go."

"That depends; but you may go as careful as you like."

It was well that their feet made but little sound in the gloomy canyon, through which their pathway led; and better yet that Gouger's eyes and ears were sharp and on the alert.

He suddenly raised his hand, and then sunk to the ground.

Without knowing why Touch-Me-Not did the same. As his comrade continued to crouch, listening, he did the same.

After a little, the noise of feet and voices came down from above more and more plainly.

"I reckon he will dew all right, ez long ez he hez ther gal tew nuss him. I hev tew much on hand tew spend my time runnin' eout an' in; but yew kin watch for me heur two days from neow, at ther same time an' place. I'm runnin' a reesk, in course, but yer capt'n pays well, an' ef he kims 'round, Kunnel Jim Canley kin foot his own bills. Good-day."

"Good-day, senor," answered a voice, with a tinge of the Mexican in its accent. "Some one will meet thee to guide thee in. Be doubly careful that no spying eyes fall on thee. Thou hast the lives of the children in thy hands."

The two were on the floor of the canyon, level with Gouger and the little sport, and at no very great distance.

Gouger, lying flat upon the ground, craned his neck to peer around a projecting spur of rock. He saw a man in the flashy garb of a Cutsleeve removing a scarf from Dr. Sylvanus Coffin's eyes. Then his hands went back to his belt, and grasped the butts of two revolvers hanging there.

As he drew the weapons he moved this way and that slowly, carefully, and a little at a time. Evidently he wanted a position from which he could take a snap-shot that would have every chance in its favor.

A snap-shot it would have to be, for Gouger's weapons were not self-cocking, and the moment the click of their hammers was heard the outlaw would be warned.

He reckoned without taking into account what was in his rear. As he was bringing his revolvers around, his thumb on the hammers, he felt the hard, cold muzzle of Touch-Me-Not's pressed tightly against his skull, just behind the right ear.

That gentle reminder settled him. He remained watching, but made no more hostile movements. The doctor's steps died away in the distance, and soon they heard the outlaw reascending the hidden path along the canyon's side.

For fully ten minutes the two remained in their uncomfortable position.

Then Gouger turned.

He had had time to cool down, and yet his face was flaming red with anger.

"Say, what ding-blasted foolishness ar' this? Ar' yer a pard, er ain't yer? Ef we's gunnin' fur road-agents, why didn't yer let me make my tally?"

"Did you think I was going to let you spoil it all? We've got the dead medicine on them now, though things don't pan out just exactly as I expected. When day after to-morrow comes, won't we be here to trail them right up? And meanwhile I can be pulling wires. I tell you there's a heap in this thing, and we haven't struck bottom yet. When we do, then you can commence shooting; and I tell you there won't be a man's back toward you then."

Gouger's wrath was gradually but surely evaporating.

"But say, pard! yer wouldn't hev pulled ef I'd 'a' let go?"

"Huckleberry would have been out a pard unless he froze onto me. But now we can go back to Glory Gulch rejoicing."

CHAPTER XXVI.

BLACK CHARLEY'S.

THE two picked their way very carefully out of the canyon and through the narrow trail.

It took time for them to get back to Glory Gulch, for they did not intend to leave room for any one there to suspect the size of their find. Their friend, the doctor, had the start of them by fully an hour; and when they got in they

found the miners' meeting in full blast, with Alligator Abe on the floor, as chairman of the committee appointed to wait on the doctor.

"Feller-critturs," he said, his breast evidently more full of confidence than it had been at the previous meeting.

"We hev seen that very square man, ther doctor, likewise ther woman. It war a short talk—but it war a short hoss ez war to be rubbed down. Ther woman are O. K., an' hyar's ther doctor, ready to speak fur her an' hisself."

This court contented itself with republican simplicity, and the report was accepted, especially as the tall form of the doctor was visible just behind him, and from the looks of Coffin's face it was evident that he intended to speak.

What he said was plain and to the point.

He apologized for being absent when the committee first called, and explained that he was absent visiting a miner by the name of Jenkins who had a cabin in the mountains and who was sick of a fever.

Then he went on to say that he knew something of affairs at the Slap Jack, as he had beforehand been consulted professionally by the lady in question, for attack of nervousness consequent upon the excitements connected with an endeavor to obtain an acknowledgment of her true name and position.

At that interview she had shown him her papers, which conclusively proved that she was married to Colonel Canley a number of years ago. Also, some letters from him, which tended to show, that, without any reasonable cause, he had deserted her.

Finally there was a letter of a late date in which he had addressed her in endearing terms and begged her to join him at Glory Gulch. Probably it was his intention, when he penned that letter, to attempt to repair the wrong done her—he even hinted as much—but when the wife reached the place, upon his own invitation, he had reconsidered his determination and utterly refused to have anything to do with her. He hoped Glory Gulch would not go back upon a woman, but, in the absence of any nearer heirs, would help her right along. At any rate, he and his friends would stand close behind her; and he guessed that the rest of Glory Gulch would not be far off.

This was the substance of the doctor's speech. He gave it in a straightforward way, and before he got through the majority of the listeners could not tell whether he had forgotten his drawl or not.

It was more than likely that, for a great part, he had.

When he added:

"An' neow let me interdoose ter this meetin' Missus Jim Canley, who kin run ther strike at ther Slap Jack ez her defunct husband never could."

A great roar arose from the crowd as a handsome woman stepped forward and greeted them with a business-like nod. She was dressed in a rich silk and velvet walking costume, the skirts of which were rather shorter than fashion in fashionable quarters would have demanded, but which did not seem out of place there. The body fitted closely to her splendid form, and was without doubt cut by an artist. Her luxuriant hair was gathered up in a great black coil, and her dark eyes gleamed brightly from under the broad brim of her wide sombrero. Few of Glory Gulch had hitherto had a near view of her; and now she was dressed with a care and style to which the inhabitants of the camp had for years been strangers.

She came to captivate; and right well did she perform her mission.

"Gentlemen," she said, and there was a sweet, wild ring to her voice that went right home to the hearts of her hearers, "you have heard the report made by one of your most esteemed citizens, a man who has no interest of his own in business affairs, but who has endeared himself to more than one of you by his skill, care and patience. I thank him that he has had the courage to tell the truth, much as it may run counter to other interests that may be better understood than mine. I am going to run the mine as it has been run—better if I can, for I have some capital of my own—and if the time ever comes when I am called on to give an account of my stewardship you will find things ship-shape and square."

As far as possible the woman came down to the level of the majority of her auditors, and struck the popular taste as well as her general appearance had done.

There was a haziness about the colonel's fate, that some of the crowd would have liked to have had explained. Sandy Bob, with his usual cross-grained cussedness, even went so far as to begin the offering of a question on the subject; but he was so promptly choked off that he did not know who hit him.

There was one man that had pushed his way into the center of the throng when it first assembled and ruffled around with an importance that was a painful burlesque on some of the larger men.

Howlin' Billy of Black Dam had crawled out at a late hour that morning, and having vainly inverted the empty bottle that he found under

his head, had gone on the war-path in search of something to stay his empty stomach.

In that way he had missed the first meeting; and had gained a very indifferent sort of information in regard to the matters that were agitating the mind of the denizens of the Gulch.

He was around now, to listen to whatever might be said—and to find, if possible, some traces of the little sport, who had taken him in tow the night before, and who had so mysteriously disappeared.

He listened to Dr. Coffin with a scowl on his face. He did not share the wide-spread confidence in the honesty of the orator.

When the woman came forward he looked at her at first in a vacant sort of way. Then his eyes gradually fixed themselves upon her, and a shadow fell on his face, as his gaze was prolonged into a wondering stare. His lips moved, and they fashioned the familiar words.

"Copperheads an' coal-ile!"

Then he took several steps forward, a half-finished cry, that was almost a scream, issued from his mouth; and just as half a dozen turned toward the old bummer, with the intention of firing him out if he attempted to disturb the harmony of the meeting—for Glory Gulch was fully committed to the beautiful woman who had taken possession of the "Slap Jack," he doubled up in a ball, and fell senseless to the ground.

And Touch-Me-Not and Tom Gouger, who had been edging nearer and nearer, watching his face until he fell, picked him up and carried him out of the jam.

"I spotted the old antelope the moment I saw him. Now maybe, he'll begin to talk—though I got the dead medicine on the doctor without his help. There's no mistake. It's the same man, though the ancient fraud didn't know it for sure."

"Which?" asked Gouger, as he heard the little man muttering to himself.

"Four by honors and the odd trick to play for. I think I have the doctor."

CHAPTER XXVII.

HE WON'T KNOW IF HE DON'T BET.

GLORY GULCH was not deeply interested in Billy Bender. He had drifted there with some money in his pockets and a good suit of clothes on his back. He also had a set of miraculous yarns, to tell to any listener, about certain wonderful sports and marvelous road agents at the Slaughter Bar—the last camp before this, that he had graced with his presence. These things became stale in course of time; the "judge" got lower and lower down in the social scale as his coin evaporated, and at the time of the advent of Touch-Me-Not he had no friends but his wits, and they supported him but badly.

When the nearest of the crowd saw the little sport carrying him out they turned away, for every one was anxious to have a word to say to the popular mistress of the Slap Jack, who was just now holding a regular levee. Perhaps it was to render futile any renewed attempt of the ruffianly assailants of the night before that she had at her back several brawny henchmen, strangers in the Gulch, who were supposed to hail from the mine, but who looked like confirmed shootists.

"Come, brace up, old man!" said Touch-Me-Not when once well out of the crowd, and he saw that Bender was reviving. "You ain't going to let the sight of a dead woman's face knock you all apart. Who is she anyhow?"

"Not now," said Bender, faintly.

"Mebbe I'll git stren'ter sling her out by an' by; but I reckon she got away with what leetle breath I hed. I'm a worthless ole cuss anyhow, an' she's a stunner on wheels. Eljer-fishbites, yes. Eh?"

"I've frequently observed that there is nothing more provoking to work with than a natural born idiot; and you're one of that kind. You can't give me an item of who she really is?"

"Which she ar' those?" answered Billy, who had been gathering strenght, and whose face assumed a look of utter ignorance.

"The woman who calls herself Mrs. Ellen Canley. She looks for all the world like one I saw sporting around Sacramento in '65; but I can't just recall her name."

"In '65? Why, pard, that war afore you war born! I war thar then, but I didn't see no sich woman as those. Teach yer Uncle Ezra how ter dance, will yer?"

And Mr. Bender winked shrewdly with his right optic. It seemed that there were some things that the talkative dead beat could hold his peace about.

"Oh, well, if you don't want to talk, keep quiet till you come to your senses, and we'll adjourn to Johnny Goodman's before the drouth gets away with the corn."

Goodman was at home, as usual, attending to his business.

When he saw Touch-Me-Not come in, he stepped around from behind his bar and button-holing him, took him to one side.

"Say, little man, when you go in on your muscle you're a screamer on wheels, and I won't say but what, when you get yer irons out, you're a ravaging war-hoss; but don't yer think it's

about time to retire? You ain't doin' much good in this burg anyhow, an' they're a-lookin' fur yer—three or four bad men, what blows the bugles an' stand up az chiefs."

"Oh, yes; I had some of 'em in here last night. I'm a chief myself, when I mount the war-path; so don't you be afraid that I'll come to grief, but just you point out some of these cantankerous catamounts when they come cavorting around. I'll bet they all belong to one gang."

"All right, if yer want ter git on it; an' I s'pose yer won't take it b d that I've gi'n yer warnin'. It don't exactly do fur me ter take sides with every stranger that comes gallopin' in. Ther boys 'ud mighty soon mount me. But when I see ther' ain't goin' ter be a fair shake, an' thet they're buttin' ag'in' him a ton to ther pound, ef he's in my house I give him fair warnin' an' a squar' show ter jump ther camp. Arter that it ain't my put."

"That's all right, little man, only these Hoosers don't pan out half as much fun as you think when they have a man to handle. I'm Touch-Me-Not, the Delicate, and when they stir me up they wake a cyclone. That will do; dada!"

He waved his hand airily, and then passed on to join Gouger, who was beckoning to him from the door.

The tough from Shasta spoke in some excitement:

"Sav, ding-blast my ole top knot, but it ain't me an' Huckleberry no more. My ole pard bez gone back on me."

"Scarcely; he's a rough one, but he don't look like that kind."

"I dunno what yer call it, but that's what it looks like. He's sold out root an' branch, goodwill an' fixtur's, an' tuk a job ov work at ther Slap Jack."

"Good enough! That pard of yours can see as far into a stone-wall as the next man, and he knows just where to butt it. How did he get in?"

"Oh, it war more luck ner judgement. Thar war a leetle row at Black Charley's while we war in ther mount'ins, an', ov course, Huckleberry war thar. He mopped the floor up, accordin' ter his usu'l style, an' er man axed him who his pards waz, an' whar they were. 'Over ther range,' sez Huckleberry. 'I'm me own pard, an' er sinner on wheels. So arter a bit ther man offered him big wages at ther Slap Jack, an' he picked up his coat an' went. That's what I heered, an' it made me r'ar."

"Don't fret yourself about Huckleberry. He is very sound on the goose-egg controversy. If you take care you can have a chance to see him in the morning. There couldn't be a better man to have there. He is one of the kind that don't say much; but when you want him he's always around."

"You bet," said Gouger, with such a perfect imitation of the missing man that Touch-Me-Not was compelled to smile.

"Come on, now. It is time for the menagerie to be fed, and I have such an appetite that I believe I could digest a grindstone."

After supper Gouger, who even yet did not thoroughly understand his new pard, proposed that they should take a turn around town.

"Ef Huckleberry war 'round I dunno ez I'd keer ter count yer in, fur I've an idear you an' me ain't prezictly used ter workin' on ther same level; but things bez bin on er dead stand fur forty-eight hour er so, an' I'm jist a-dyin' fur fun."

"From all accounts you'll get it if you start out with me in tow; but I occasionally have just such vague longings myself, and it would be a shame to spoil sport. They say Black Charley's is lively; we'll roam around there, and you can look for a hundred and forty pounds to the square inch. But don't shoot till I give the word."

With this solemn injunction Touch-Me-Not led the way out into the street, and the two started for Back Charley's. For a wonder Billy Bender was not around, when he might have been taken in tow, but it was likely that he would turn up in the course of the evening, though Touch-Me-Not began to doubt if his tongue would be any the looser.

Black Charley's Ranch was like Johnny Goodman's, only more so. For the size of the camp—and it was not such a small one either—it was surprising how many men there were to go out on the racket. They had looked into The Blizzard as they went along, and found it full and booming; but the Ranch was just running over. When Touch-Me-Not threw open the door and tripped in, followed by the ponderous Gouger, there were so many in the room, following their respective avocations, or taking their favorite recreations, that no one appeared to notice the entrance of the two, who proceeded to sample the decoctions at the bar, and then quietly found places at the side of the room.

They played cards sometimes at Johnny Goodman's; but this place was a perfect pandemonium.

Everything was going on. There were three or four tables at which were seated, with glasses beside them, poker and seven-up players. Then there was a faro spread that claimed its share

of patrons, though the game was young and the better shys. In another corner was a four-card monte man, with a scowl on his dark, hungry face, as he watched his little lay-out, and the fingers of his countrymen, who were adepts at check-charming as well as at the grizzly. Probably in another corner, lurked the man with the strap-game, or pick-a-loop, though he could hardly expect many victims among the patrons of the Ranch.

Touch-Me-Not sat by himself, just at the corner of the room, while Gouger had a more central location, where he could watch the tiger fleshing and unflashing his claws. The talons, by the way, were visible the most of the time, for the bank, which was backed by Black Charley's capital, had the run, which was probably the reason why so few cared to tackle the king of the jungle.

"It's a square game without a limit!" said the dealer, looking persuasively in the direction of the young sport in the corner. "We win about as often as we lose, and we lose twice to where we win once, and make a living tending a quartz-crusher in the daytime. It's just fun for the boys that win often. The lucky man that kin break this bank on the turn is somewhere about, I feel it in my bones, but he won't know if he don't bet."

CHAPTER XXVIII

LIGHTING A MATCH.

The words of the dealer were almost a challenge.

Touch-Me-Not looked up with a twinkle in his eyes. Such a peroration generally—at least in his experience—betokened a "fifty-three deck," a "spring box," and the usual complement of "hollows and rounds." And yet he was sometimes willing to play against all of those.

He moved several times uneasily in his seat, but before he could decide to rise, a noise of struggling at the door attracted his attention. A man seemed bent upon coming in; while a couple of his friends were just as bent on keeping him out.

"Oh, come on, Billy. This heur shebang are no good. We'll go on to ther Blizzard. That's whar ther shootists hang out. You'll hev a chance fur a rip-snotin blow-out thar; but heur the'r' all on ther pastel cards."

"Lemme go! I tell yer, I'm Leetle Billy, an' death on ther shoot. I'm goin' to show 'em what a white man kin do, w'ot's ready ter plug fur blood an' ha'r. Oh, I'm ther infantile terror ov ther West, ther ontamed, half-sized cater-mout ov the Rockies. Ther genocine, onder-vided half ov er new-born airtquake, an' when I crook me finger, suthin' drops. You hear me, say? I'm comin'. Wahoop. Who's got duck-ats ter put up that I can't take ther girls right off'n him, eyes shut er eyes open, back-handed, onder ther legs, er a straight pull ar' plug. I'll shoot any man in ther house fur luv, blood, er money; but money's my best holt, every time."

The struggling ceased. The man stood on the threshold just long enough to have his defiance heard and digested by every man in the house; and then the challenger came tumbling in.

Little Billy was not as tall as a church steeple, nor as heavy as a mule's hinder end—perhaps—but he was a straight, well-formed six footer, who looked as though he had imbibed just enough benzine to account for his utter recklessness, without destroying his ability to give a very good account of himself, if there was anything in him, and the black eyes that glared through the mop of hair on his face were resolute to viciousness.

"I don't come off'en; but when I do I jist shake this ole burg up fur all that's out. Ef ther's ary man ez knows whar I'm from let him waltz up ter ther handle o' this gin-mill an' turn in about er quart o' benzine with me; then we'll kim down ter biz. Black Charley's a good man, a blamed good man, an' he won't go back on Little Billy when he's out on ther tear."

Black Charley nodded as though he had seen infantile William before, and was willing that he should have his own way, while three or four men rolled up from different parts of the room with extended paws.

"Good fur you, Bill; we're dyin' fur fun."

"But don't give us er fun'ral ef yer kin help it."

"Histe it in, Bill. Ther more bug-juice yer kin stow away ther better yer hits ther bull's-eye. We know yer ov old."

Some shook hands; others, disdaining the ceremony, seized tumblers, and Black Charley, who was behind the bar, set down the two decanters under the looking-glass, with a flourish.

"Ain't there nobody else w'ot knows whar I live? Ef thar air, an' he don't kim up ter ther milk ov luv'n kindness what Charley slings, I'll hev me eyes on him an' snatch him bald-headed. It's drink er fout when Little Billy's on ther rounds."

It happened that his eyes fell full on Tom Gouger as he spoke. The Death Shot of Shasta had been watching him with interest.

"I kinder wish Huckleberry war 'round," he muttered to himself, and then rising, he walked straight toward the bar.

"See hyar, blamed ef I jist remember you," said Little Billy, placing himself directly in Gouger's way. "You sure you know me?"

"You bet. Yer A. Shooter, from Shustersville; an' I'm yer fust cousin. I ain't very dry, anyhow, but I thought sooner'n you should starve, I'd go in."

"Yer got me that time. Hit her five fingers, an' then gi'n her another lick. Ther ain't nobody ez will kick. But I'd like ter hev yer handle, fur I bet ye'r' a chief."

"Tom Gouger, ther Death-Shot ov Shasta's what they ginner'ly call me; but I can't do nothin' with ther rops just now; I'm sorter moultin'-like, an' under ther weather. But you are a screamer I kin tell by yer looks. Fact are, pard, I jist froze right enter yer, the minit I see'd yer. 'Thar's ther pard,' sez I, 'ez kin lay right over yer. Huckleberry orter be hyar.'"

Gouger had got rid of his boisterous tones, and offensive style on the very shortest of notices; and was feeling around as carefully as if he was handling a newly-born infant.

"But ye'r' a shuter? Good enuf! I never let one slide 'thout hevin' a pull at his ha'r. Git down yer benzine an' come fur me."

"Oh, I ain't much ov a shooter," responded Gouger, modestly; "but I allus reckon ter kerry my end."

"Hyar's duckats, then. Thar's a slug yer can't come nigh my pattern. Kiver it ef yer dar'."

With a resounding whack he plastered a fifty-dollar gold-piece down on the bar and then, with arms akimbo, and a provoking leer on his face, he stood watching Gouger, who produced his buckskin with a show of hesitation.

"I mout reesk it fur three shots; but I couldn't stand ag'in' yer all day. I git tired in the arms, like."

"That's ther way ter talk it!" exclaimed Little Billy, with an air of triumph. "Now ef yer got ary pard heur trot him out. You'll need him afore ther cirkiss ar' over."

"Nary pard hev I got; but I reckon I kin pick one up ter hold ther candle. But ther sooner we git ter work, ther sooner I'll hev my buck-kin empty."

"That—an' suthin' else," answered Billy, darkly as he turned to Black Charley.

That individual did not seem altogether pleased. This irruption had already broken up a number of the games. Some jumped the play and went home, others crowded up to see the sport, while other loungers quietly withdrew. Touch-Me-Not heard two of the latter speaking together as they gathered themselves for departure.

"He don't come often; but never know'd Leetle Billy to strike ther Gulch that he didn't stir up ther annimiles. He killed three men ther last time."

"Yes, sirree; an' outsiders git hurt. He's a whaler on wheels but I don't keer ter see him spin. I war thar once."

By the time the two had departed the preparations for the trial of skill were completed. A connecting door to an additional room was thrown open, and that gave a range of some twenty yards.

"I dunno what yer like, but I'll sample yer with suthin' er leetle eazy like," said Little Billy, after a whispered conference with a pard.

The latter went to the further end of the range and pinned up two cards almost side by side, placing a lamp near them.

Then, Billy stepped forward and with some deliberation fired five shots. Each of the first four clipped a corner of one of the cards, and the fifth sent home the tack that held it, while the card fluttered to the floor. A shout of approbation arose from the crowd.

"Purdy fa'r," said Gouger, in a wavering voice. "Say, yer wouldn't mind givin' me er few shots fur practice, ef they don't count? I ain't used ter ther light hyar, an' I tole yer I war moultin'."

"Take er dozen; but when yer begins yer must keep right erlong."

Gouger paced the distance to the opposite wall, looked gravely at his card, and then deliberately hammered another tack in an inch or so above the first.

Then he came back and took his station.

"Hyar goes fur fun!"

He raised his pistol and fired six shots. The first one drove the tack just inserted, and the remaining five cut a perfect ring around the hole.

"It ar' all hunky-dunky, ez me ole side-pard, Red Bear used ter say. Now, hyar goes fur keeps."

As he spoke he flung up his left hand, and one corner of the card flew; he turned and bent backward, as though bending a crab, and away flew another; he stooped, and aiming to the rear between his legs, clipped the third; the fourth went from a shot from under his knee, which was sighted above it. Then he drew from his pocket a little mirror, and holding it up, fired to the rear and drove the tack.

"Whoop!" shouted Gouger, suddenly letting himself out after his old style. "They say I'm a blower, but I'll be ding-blasted ef I can't shute!" and he executed a war dance that made the floor shake.

At the same time he recharged his pistols with lightning-like dexterity.

The most of the crowd were shouting with him, for such quick, precise fancy shooting was new to the Gulch; but Little Billy looked solemn as a sick grizzly.

"Yer a chief, an' don't you forgit it, an' thar ain't no use settin' yer any or'nary patterns. I'll take one more hitch, an' ef yer wins on that, yer takes ther cake. It ain't no joke, an' I want three tries at it meself, an' not quite so fur. Call out yer pard."

"No pard hev I. I'm playin' er lone hand, an' I want ter know ther natur' ov the game afore I let any stranger assist."

"Yer'll hev ter find er pard, er by ther livin' blazes, ye'll eat lead an' chaw steel. I'll set yer ther pattern, an' then yer kin see whar's ther man ez hev ther gizzard ter try yer sand. Mike, take ther match."

The same man who had tacked up the cards slouched to the target-end of the room.

"Now outen ther lights!" exclaimed Little Billy, coarsely.

His friends and Black Charley were all ready. The lights went out. In the room all was darkness, and the only sound was the suppressed breathing of the spectators.

Then Mike drew the match sharply against the wall, and held it up.

Straight at the blazing stick fired Little Billy—and the first shot was a failure.

Once more it was tried, and this time the little spark of light went suddenly out. The bullet had squarely crushed the burning end as it rested against the wall.

"Stand up yer pard an' do ther trick. Hit ther match on ther head er take water," said Billy, sternly, as some one lighted a single lamp.

In either hand he held a revolver, and he covered Gouger as he spoke.

"I ain't got no pard; an' ef I had I wouldn't ax him to reesk his life."

"Allow me."

Touch-Me-Not stepped quietly forward.

"The man can shoot; and he must have a chance to show what he's worth. I'll hold ther match."

"Hol' on! hol' on!" said Gouger, in some excitement, as Touch-Me-Not turned away with a match in his hand. "You're a white man, mister, an' I daren't reesk it. Don't yer know ef I hit yer ther camp'd hang me, sure? I kin fight a storm, too; but I ain't that bad a man."

He moved after Touch-Me-Not and caught him by the arm.

"Can you do the shot?" asked the latter, sharply, as he turned around.

"In course I kin; but, pard, it's your life an' mine, an', honest Injun, I haven't got ther sand."

"Do it you will, though, or fight me, now. And if you miss, I swear I will cut your throat. No man with me backs water, and if he hasn't sand enough of his own I'll load him up with mine. Do it or die!"

Then the little sport turned to the house at large.

"I've got five thousand dollars that says he can hit ther match's head ther second try or sooner, and ther bargain was for three. Who looks my game in the face or stumps around where I live?"

"Five thousand dollars ar' a sight ov money out hyar. It 'ud bust two or three purty lively sports wide open ter lose that, but me an' my pards kin put down ther half ov that. Thar ain't ther man livin' kin do it in the fust two times er tryin', I'll bet my life on it."

"Taken!" said Touch-Me-Not, coolly. "I'll put up twenty-five hundred and my life against yours, and if I win I'll take ther stakes! When I go out on the sport I want a sight for my money, and my pile is the limit. Inside of that I take all offers."

The cool words of the little man electrified the house. He was recognized now by more than one there as the man on his muscle at Johnny Goodman's, and it seemed he must know what sort of a hand he held or he would hardly call on Little Billy. No bluff was this, but a straight bet, with no chance for pass or raise.

"Stranger, that word's yer death-warrant. Put up yer money—the game's set; and when this gerloot gits through shootin' I'll try one barrel on you! Hyer's our pile."

Into the hands of Black Charley was placed the five thousand dollars. He and one or two others tried to stop this dreadful game of death—for such it would be if the deal was finished.

"Dry up on that!" interrupted Little Billy sternly, and Black Charley looked into the muzzles of two leveled revolvers. "I've got ther skeels ez good ez corralled. It took me er month ter learn ther trick, an' ther' ain't ther other man livin' ez kin do ther shot! An' ter eend ther frolic, Court Hammond'll go in outen ther dew."

Touch-Me-Not did not appear to notice the coarse bravado. He looked quietly at Gouger.

"You're shooting for your life and mine. You daren't plug me, and if you miss I'll kill you sure."

"He'll do it," muttered Gouger. "He means it. I wish ter glory Huckleberry war hyar. Ef I don't git ther trimbles I kin make ary shot

ary man ever invented; an' ef I gits 'em—now I lay me! Oh, cinnermon b'ars an' wildcats, what's ter he did with my cussed narves? It's no use torkin'—I ain't dead game—but I kin shoot."

So this bully thought to himself, owning in his heart, with a frankness that was strange, to the one blot on his prowess.

This time Touch-Me-Not was a little more careful in his selection of a match. He turned them over, and refused several, before he found one that would suit his purpose.

Then, for the last time he turned to Gouger, and spoke in a whisper:

"You shoot by sight and not by aim. The first time I'll not light the match—I'll leave that for you to do. Fire quick, and fire at the glow. They mean foul play. If you're sure of it try your left hand."

He walked off and took his station.

"Light's out!" he exclaimed; and utter darkness came upon the room.

Then on the knee of his pantaloons he rubbed the match sharply, and the next instant against the wall appeared a tiny, almost imperceptible glow.

Then, instantly, there were two pistol-shots, so closely blended as scarcely to be distinguished as two; and the sound of a man falling heavily to the floor.

At the same time the match in the distance burst into a sputtering flame.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A SPRAY OF CHLOROFORM.

THE man who fell so solidly to the floor was Tom Gouger. And no hand or ball had struck him. It was that his nerves had got the better of him—though not before his left hand had sent the unerring bullet on its mission.

Not an instant too soon was he, either; for scarcely had his finger tightened on the trigger when a hand struck him on the side, that had made a clutch for his right arm. Gouger had kept to himself a fact that only Touch-Me-Not had suspected. Though he shot center with either hand, he was, in reality, left-handed.

Then, as Gouger's overstrung nerves gave way, and the match spluttered bluey, the sharp, clear tones of Touch-Me-Not cut through the darkness:

"The match is burning where he hit its head; and now, Captain Cutsleeve, I'm after your life. It was a foul shot you had at me; I'll take a fair one at you. Black Charley, turn up the light!"

But no light was turned up. Instead, there was a jingle of broken glass, and then three shots, fired at the spot where Touch-Me-Not was supposed to be standing.

After that, there was a scampering of feet; and then some outsider, more cool or more curious than the rest, lit a lamp, disclosing Touch-Me-Not standing over Gouger's senseless body, in either outstretched hand a leveled pistol, while his eyes were searching this way and that for the Little Billy, whom he had so boldly charged with being Captain Cutsleeve.

But no Little Billy was there. Whether he was afraid to face the little man, or feared the storm of investigation this charge would raise, he and his friends had vanished.

"Hands up, all!" cried the little sport. "I don't know friends from foes here; but the first man I see fooling 'round his irons, till this thing gets straight, I'll plug. Black Charley, hand me ther stakes."

"Hyar's ther coin; but the balance ar' on ther huff, an' that you'll hev ter take, whar yer find it."

And stepping past a row of upraised hands, Black Charley handed to Touch-Me-Not the five thousand.

"Thar's a hundred ez berlongs ter yer friend on ther floor. Will yer take that in, er is he goin' ter speak fur hisself? Yer kin put up yer pops—thar ain't er man hyar ez wouldn't fight fur you two. Yer sport from ther ground up, an' them's ther kind we like."

"I believe you, my friend; and there's no use chasing Little Billy and his pards; they are half way over the mountains. They gave me a close call; but I'll be even with them yet."

"But are he Capt'n Cutsleeve?"

"Captain Cutsleeve is the only man I ever heard of doing the match sho'. He invented it—so I've heard, anyhow. When he set that copy I dropped to him at once; though I had another cause for suspicion."

While he spoke, he was examining Gouger.

No trace of wound was there on him—the man simply lay in a stupor or swoon.

"But who fired the other shot? Your man lit ther match. I reckon; but who did ther rest of ther shootin'?"

An anxious outsider made the inquiry.

"Captain Cutsleeve," answered Touch-Me-Not, sternly. "I knew there was going to be foul play, and slipped to the other side, holding ther match in my left hand. If I hadn't done it—Go to the wall, and see where I would have been."

A cry of wonder came from the lips of the men who went.

There were four bullet-holes, well bunched together, covering the spot where Touch-Me-

Not ought to have been. A little to one side was Gouger's bullet in the wall, and beyond that the marks of the two that the *soi-disant* Little Billy had fired.

While they looked and wondered Gouger's voice was heard, faint and husky:

"They reached fur me right hand, pard; but I tried it with me left ez yer told me. Ef I missed cut me throat fur I ain't fit ter live no-how. I ain't solid."

"You're all right, old man; and it's Heaven's blessing that you ar'n't solid. If you were, with your shooting you'd depopulate Arizona. I've heard of you before. It takes backbone to hold you to your work when the game's against you; but I've got enough for both. Come. It's not been a bad evening's work, and we'll meander home."

Various efforts were made to detain him; but he would not stay. He roused up Tom Gouger, who looked more like a vanquished than a victorious hero, and with the Death Shot of Shasta at his heels left the building.

"You needn't have got so excited, Gouger," Touch-Me-Not said, as they gained the street. "They didn't want you; it was I that they were after."

"An' they'll git yer yit ef I don't quit me ding-blasted foolishness. It warn't my chip, an' I hed ter set up fur a chief, an' gi'n meself away. Kerry me out on er chip—I feel too small ter walk."

Gouger felt keenly the disgrace that attached to his loss of nerve, but the little sport spoke kindly enough.

"Oh, you did it well enough. Win your game and it don't make much difference how if it's only fair and square. We'll go to bed now. That's the place for us. We've got work on hand for to-morrow and next day."

The two sipped quietly in at Goodman's.

"Say, pard, I don't b'leve it ar' safe ter sleep. Thar's music lingerin' in ther air, an' that cuss'll hev another twitch at yer tail feathers. Less take it watch an' watch about."

"You be hanged! After to-night they won't come at us unless they have a young army; and that would raise the Gulch."

"You kin sleep then; but blowed ef I sht me eyes till yourn ar' open."

Gouger seated himself resolutely upon the side of the bed, and his intentions were as good as his word, but, as time passed, his eyes grew drowsy, he nodded, and finally lay down to catch a little fleeting rest.

Then the window-shutters, that must have been already tampered with, opened a little, the window was softly raised, and into the room came two jets of chloroform, full into the faces of the sleepers.

Both started, and Gouger gave one hoarse cry, while Touch-Me-Not struggled fiercely against the powerful anæsthetic.

The dose was too powerful for flesh and blood to resist, and he fell back again, while, like tigers, three men sprung through the window.

"Kill the tough!" cried a harsh voice. "His yell shook the house. Here! Hand out the little sport. Two of us can carry him. He only weighs a hundred and twenty-eight pounds."

"Yes; but he's solid lightnin'! Hyar he ar'?"

While the second man spoke the sound of hurrying feet came from the passage. Gouger's cry had aroused Johnny Goodman, who started with a pistol in either hand.

Before now men with the triangles had raided through his house, and when he suspected delirium tremens he generally tried to meet them before they started.

As he stood outside, listening at the door, a knife came down into Gouger's back, with a sickening "chug," and then the three men dropped through the open window, taking with them the form of the insensible Touch-Me-Not.

CHAPTER XXX.

A CHANCE FOR LIFE.

COLONEL JAMES CANLEY was undeniably better.

He came to his senses at last, weak but clear-headed, and found a girl-woman seated by his bedside.

He stared at her a little blankly at first. There was something strangely familiar about her.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Your nurse. Hush! Do not talk. It will only harm you."

"I must talk. Who are you? How did you get here?"

"Never mind; I am a friend. I was brought here to save your life."

"Ah, you cannot deceive me. You are Ellen!"

"Yes. I am your daughter, brought to your bedside by the strangest of events. But say no more. By-and-by, when you are stronger we will talk."

"My daughter? Oh. But how came you here? You were to go back with the major. I never dreamed."

"But I did not go back with the major, and I am here. Let that go. Do you know a Doctor Coffin? He it was that saved your life—for ye— are going to get well. He will come to see ye."

again soon; and as soon as you can bear it, he will take you from this terrible place."

"Where, then, am I?"

"Ye'r' with ther Cutsleeves, kurnel. Ha, ha! We ain't so bad ez we look, an' now an' then we do a good turn. We're doin' one fur you now."

A masked outlaw stood grinning at the two; at least Ellen seemed to see the savage smile that the words betokened. Yet she was becoming accustomed to the presence of the bandits, who came and went, and scarcely ever deigned to speak to her. These words did not move her nearly as much as they did her father.

His pale face flushed, he gasped, and looked from the one to the other—from the masked outlaw to the fair young girl—and gasped:

"My poor girl, why have you come? Would that I had left you in your safety. Since you started everything has gone wrong for me; and this is the worst of all!"

"The best, you mean. What better thing could there be for me than nursing you back to life?"

"Life is not always worth the price it costs to keep it. Why did you come?"

"She come, kunnel, because she couldn't help it. Yer see, we owed you one fur a favor yer done us—mebbe onbeknownst ter you, but all the same a favor, fur yer saved a Cutsleeve's life. So, when we found yer up a tree, like, an' lieber ter pass in yer checks, we done ther clean thing by yer, an' brung yer hyer, whar powerful good nussin' pulled yer through. At least I judge ye'll make ther raffle if yer don't hev no backsets."

"And then?"

"Then we'll take yer down whar we found yer, an' turn yer loose."

"And my daughter?"

"She is yer darter, then. Durned cur'us that. We brung her hyer, 'bout ther same time, but not ter nuss her up—not by er dog-gone sight. We got one ag'in' her."

"Heavens! What can you have against one who is an utter stranger?"

"You saved er life—she tuk one er two. It's er way we hev. Life fur life; an' I reckon she'll hev ter lose hern."

Very grave and positive was the outlaw now; and yet Colonel Canley could neither understand nor believe him.

"But you cannot be such cowards, such brutes! How could a girl harm you? Or if harm she has done and by your villainous laws a life is forfeit, take my worthless one and let her go."

"Sorry, kunnel, but ther thing can't be did. Hyer, every tub stands on its own bottom. Ef it can't stand it's got ter flop over. Don't excite yerself. The doctor 'll be hyer ag'in, soon; an' we want yer lookin' yer best so ez he kin take yer inter Glory Gulch, soon ez it ar' possible."

"What! and leave my child here, in the power of you wretches? Never!"

"Kim, kim. Hard words ain't doin' good ner hurt—cept ter you. I jist looked in ter see how ye'r' makin' it, an' ef yer could do without yer nuss. She had better bundle up an' kimerlong. Her old quarters are a-waitin' fur her. When she goes out ov them it ill bet her hev an intervoo with er rope. I dunno ez I did right in lettin' her stay hyer; but when ther capt'n ar' erway I'm boss hyer, an' I run ther resks, I've did ther best I could but I ain't runnin' no more resks. Mag kin take keer ov yer now, an' I want her in hyer afore Coffin kims, so ez he kin give her ther p'int."

"And you would take her away in the very first moment of recognition? No, not while I have life."

"Yer haven't any ov that article ter spar', so don't yer try cavortin' 'round. I'd hate ter draw on er sick man an' a gal, but if there's any trouble I'd drop her dead, right hyer."

He touched the revolver in his belt significantly; and there was no mistaking his tone. Colonel Canley, whose muscles had been momentarily thrilled with a short-lived strength, fell back upon his couch and covered his face with his hands while the outlaw coldly prepared Ellen as before, and led her away. As he left the room the Mexican woman whom Ellen had seen the morning after her arrival, entered and took her post with a resigned air.

Whether all this was to kill the colonel or not appeared to make no difference to the lieutenant of banditti, who was as unconcerned as fate itself.

As for Ellen, she had borne this all with a cool resignation that was wonderful; yet, when she was once more alone in the little prison pen, and felt that no eyes were on her, she crouched in one corner in a mute despair, against which for a time she found it useless to strive.

"Cheer up, little woman," said a not unkindly voice at her ear.

Ellen could not have even given a fair guess at how long she had been there; or how, or when Dr. Coffin had entered.

There he was, though, looking down upon her, with deep concern pictured on his now not altogether unhandsome face.

"What is there to cheer me? Indeed, for me, could anything be worse?"

"A heap worse. You ain't dead yet—and

you've got a friend here, in me, that can stand by you to the death—or he may help you out of all your troubles."

"And you will?"

A sudden hope sprung up in Ellen's breast. She felt that the doctor was deeply in earnest, and could not believe that he would trifle with her.

"Perhaps. The fact is, Miss Canley, I am a better man than I seem. I have had to appear before you in the character I put on when I first came to Glory Gulch. After I had wrung it in on the people I could not drop it. Until I met you I did not care. Now, I wish only that you could see me at my best."

"What difference? Yet, why did you assume a disguise in the first place?"

"A man will do much for his life's sake. It is a long story. Enough that a villain deserted a young girl—a cousin of mine. Though the man was a villain he stood well enough in the world, and he had brothers and cousins who would make his quarrel their own."

"They had wealth, too; and law or no law, they had their way in that section of the blue-grass region."

"I did not care for that. I shot the scoundrel, and then I fled. Before I had gone fifty miles three of the family were after me—in fact, were upon me."

"Then it was a desperate fight for life, for they came armed for slaughter. For them the law was too slow, certainly as they could direct its course."

"I was wounded in a dozen places, but I struck them all down and escaped. Since then I have hidden my real name and identity, not from fear, but because the thought of having to kill these sleuth-hounds was more repugnant to me even than the halter, and I believed that they would never leave my track so long as they lived."

"I buried myself here; and I have done my duty, whether to the honest men of Glory Gulch or even to the outlaws of the mountain, and in so doing I have accumulated some wealth and a troop of friends."

"A day or two ago I found that I had been fleeing from a shadow."

"The man I had fancied I had slain recovered from his wounds; and the three avengers, also recovered, after several years of riotous living were slain in brawls. A fortune also awaits my claiming, and nothing now holds me in Glory Gulch but—you!"

"I?"

"Yes, you. Strange as it may seem, from the first moment my eyes fell upon you I loved you, and vowed that I would save you. It was for you that I saved Colonel Canley's life; for you that I run the risks of these renewed visits. On earth there is but one power that can save you, and I am that power."

"And you will save me—me and my poor father?"

"Rest easy in regard to him; he is in no danger. You have heard the code of these Cutsleeves—an eye for an eye, a life for a life. He has saved one of the gang, and they will repay his kindness if it costs them the life of every man in the gang. You have taken life; and they will have yours, no matter whose daughter you may be."

"How then can you save me?"

"Through the man you have seen more than once. He is the lieutenant of the band, and is bound to me by gratitude, since I actually dragged him away from death's door."

"He dares not violate the strict letter of his oath, but he will help my wife to escape. Your father can follow at his leisure, and once safely beyond the reach of these bandits, if the devoting my life can secure it, your happiness will be supreme. Speak, and speak quickly. It was only after hard pleading that I secured this interview. Will you make me the most happy or the most miserable of men—for I swear, if you shut your eyes, and go blindly on to destruction, that I will not survive you."

He spoke in the most impassioned of strains, and held out his hands beseechingly. If ever there was truth in a man's face, there was in his—and yet the villain lied.

Ellen hesitated.

She owed much to this man who, under such strange circumstances, was pleading for her hand. She had now met him three or four times, and at each interview he had gained upon her. Perhaps, if she had time, she could care for him.

"It is sudden," she faltered. "Give me time to think. When once I answer, I want to hold that answer as good as sworn to."

"But there is no time. The chief—Captain Cutsleeve—is coming, and at any moment he may be here. Upon him I have no hold, and if you have ever heard of him at all, you know how cruel he can be."

"And I can make excuse for but one more visit. By that time it will be patent that your father is out of danger. If I am to take you out to freedom, life, and love, you must go with me then. Quick! Why will you hesitate? Your answer."

"I cannot give it now. I will not altogether

say no at this time; yet I doubt if it will then be yes."

"It will be; it must be. I shall save you in spite of yourself."

"Time's up, doctor, hustle out."

At the door stood the masked lieutenant.

The doctor caught Ellen's hand, pressed it firmly, raised it reverently to his lips, and was gone, leaving the girl alone in the semi-darkness to ponder over his strange proposal.

"I dare not; I dare not," she whispered to herself. "There is a face between us. I may never see him again, and yet, if he should come what would there be left for me? Why could it not be he that offers so much? Yet he has left me to my fate."

And the face that she was thinking of belonged to Touch-Me-Not, the little sport.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ONE FROM THE SHOULDER.

LIEUTENANT LEW, of the Cutsleeves, was eminently worthy of his place. He was not a large man, but he exactly filled his boots. He always precisely fulfilled orders from his superior, and if his inferiors did not carry out his own his knife or pistols began to speak. He had killed numerous men in his day, and if his life was spared he expected to kill as many more.

Yet this man, steeped in all sorts of crime, bowed to two things—discipline and gratitude.

He walked down the narrow path by which the doctor made his exit, chatting glibly enough.

"When yer wants ther trick done tip me ther wink. It's jist ez well not ter let ther rest ov ther boys in. They wouldn't squeal now, whatever yer did; but some day it mout be differ'nt, an' it's jist ez well not ter give 'em a hank on yer."

"I'm trusting yew. Ther old man air doomed; an' I reckon yew hed better g'in him ther fust dose of his cordial tewtiner. He won't go up ther flume fur a day er so, an' by that time this nonsense with ther girl will be all straight, one way er another. Ez fur ther leetle man with ther white hands, he's dumb ez a clam. Wild horses couldn't make him speak, an' I'll never find what went ov our money er Gunnison's papers."

Lieutenant Lew laughed softly. It amused him to hear the doctor put on the twang with him. Then he whispered:

"When yer comes back he won't be here. He ain't more ner ther size ov yer thumb; but I reckon, ef he got at his tools we'd find him a desprit bad man."

"With or without. He crawled all over the Peters boys. An' he's slippery ez an eel an' won't speak ter save his life."

"An' yer say yer hev no funder use fur him? Good enough. I owe him one, an' it's a big one."

"Go for him."

"Good-mornin'. Neither hev we."

Leaving the doctor to go on his way through the canyon Lieutenant Lew went back, softly and slowly. He had something of a care on his mind, and he was, for a time, more than thoughtful.

After a bit, however, his face brightened, his step quickened.

"I'll do it myself, an' I'll do it now. It war his bullet ez downed poor Tom, an' it'll be my hand ez will wipe out ther record."

He took out a keen knife that hung at his belt, tested the point on his thumb and then returned it to its sheath. A moment later he threw open a little door that was an exact counterpart to the one to Ellen's cell. Within, with a chain around his waist and his arms held painfully behind his back, stood Touch-Me-Not.

The little sport was somewhat paler looking, and his clothes a good deal more dilapidated; but he was really very little the worse for the wear of the past few days. Though inwardly raging, outwardly he was as cold as the North Sea whaling-ground, and the entrance of the outlaw was, to all appearance, scarcely noticed.

"It's kinder rough," was the salutation of Lieutenant Lew. "I've kinder taken a fancy ter you, feedin' ye up like a overgrow'd baby; but it's got ter be did. I've kim ter turn yer out."

"Quite likely, after the trouble you had to get me. When you turn me out it will be feet foremost."

"Wall now, pard, I didn't think ye'd drop to it so quick. The fact ar', there's on'y one road out fur you, an' that's over ther range. I guess you'll hev ter start."

"How?"

The little sport never winced, and he asked after the manner of his taking-off as though it was a matter of the merest modicum of interest.

"Ther ain't no question but what you killed Tom, an' ef it kim to ther regular thing, it 'ud be ther rope. But life's uncert'in, an' I can't spend ther time a-waitin', so I'm jist goin' ter pitch yer over inter ther drink, an' be done with it. You killed me brother, an' venge'nce can't wait."

"All right. If that's your lay-out pull your

cards. I don't see that I've got a chance any-way at all, but I'll have the fun of seeing you deal. I suppose you'll chuck me in alive."

"That's the figger. At least it would be ef I thort yer hed ther grit. Curse you, I believe yer hev. Ef yer goin' ter squeal, I'll put er knife in yer now. It's easier draggin' out er corpus!"

"Yes, it's more fun to kick a dead lion than a live mule. Well, take your choice. Drop me now, or lead me out to slaughter. If my time has come I'll go out of the wet; and if it hasn't, there isn't the knife forged that can break the skin."

Lieutenant Lew looked at him in mute admiration. This beat everything he had ever seen. The man must know that his words were no practical jest; and yet here he was sneering about the preparations for his own execution.

"You'll sing a different song when ther time comes," he said, at length.

"Lead me out and see. Open the road and I'll walk right over the top. I tell you, man, I can't die until my time comes; and when it does, whining won't help it, and I won't try it."

"Try it I will, then. With yer hands handcuffed tergether ther ain't much ter risk. Ef yer tries ter run I've a bullit ez kin run faster. Ef yer stop, er yell, I've a knife ter sink in yer back. Ef yer goes straight ahead, you'll see when yer git thar."

Around Touch-Me-Not's waist there was an iron ring, that opened and closed with lock and hinge.

To the lock Lieutenant Lew applied a key, and shackle and chain fell to the floor with a sullen clang. Then he blindfolded his prisoner with a scarf, and led him out to the open air.

"Now move forrads. I'm doin' this job all alone on my own hook, an' I want ter do it right. When ther drop comes you'll know it."

Was the man in earnest? Touch-Me-Not thought so, though he stepped forward for a few paces without hesitation, Lieutenant Lew following briskly.

Then the little sport half turned his head.

"Is it far, yet?" he asked.

"Go on, an' you'll find out."

The voice was close at his shoulder, for Touch-Me-Not had suddenly halted, and then, at the instant he wheeled and struck outward, and a little upward, straight at the voice. All blindfolded as he was Touch-Me-Not had suddenly slipped his wrists from the fetters that he had allowed to remain there only at will, and judging of his time and distance by sound alone had sent a right-hander home.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A BROKEN NECK AND A NEW LIEUTENANT.

TOUCH-ME-NOT counted well when he took his risks. Had he attempted to tear the bandage from his eyes the outlaw's knife would have fallen. Never, in all his life had the little sport hit quite so quickly, or quite so hard. The blow was simply terrific.

There was a crash, a snap, and the heavy thud of a falling body, even as Touch-Me-Not tore away the scarf and glared around him.

In front lay Lieutenant Lew, with a broken neck, quivering just as an ox quivers that has been felled by a pole-ax. The victor turned away with a shudder, and saw that not more than two paces further, in the direction he had been going, there was the clearly cut edge of the precipice. Advancing, he looked over, and away below were jagged rocks, among which tumbled a shallow stream.

"He meant it," said Touch-Me-Not to himself. "I'm glad of it, too. He has his last sickness. That time I hit for keeps, and got it in where it would do the most good. It's done, and the wretch deserved no mercy, so there's no use to worry over it. Now to make the most of it. Thank my stars, there's no nonsense about me. He's just about my size—that is, my size when I'm mad. About that time I weigh a ton."

With some little show of repugnance, however, he carried the body back to the room, which he had just left, and then hastily donned the clothing that speedily transformed him into a Cutsleeve.

"Upon my soul, I believe it's the man who was Hart Blaine's second. Well somebody else will go over into the drink this time. I had my checks stacked and counted but it wasn't my turn to change in."

Again he lifted the body; and this time he bore it out and cast it over the brink. It was the last of Cinnamon Cy. Then he gazed down into the valley that he could see in the distance.

It was a remarkably well-hidden pocket in the mountains. He could see huts and tents nestling there, and the smoke from half a dozen fires was rising through the marvelously clear air. It had as much the air of a prosperous little mining settlement as of an outlaw's camp.

This was away down below him, and down along the face of the canyon he could see the trend of a narrow ledge which led to the spot.

This aerie where he stood was probably intended as a place of resort in case a last desperate extremity should come. A handful of men if cool, desperate and well armed could hold it against an army. Meantime several of the

niche-like huts along the pathway were used as prison-pens. Some little distance beyond and below was the place where Colonel Canley was slowly recovering; while above—though concealed from sight by a bend in the canyon wall—Ellen was pondering over her miserable fortune.

Touch-Me-Not noted everything visible with a careful eye. The mask was on his face; the outlaw uniform over his form. For the present he thought he could defy recognition, and he would trust to luck not to betray his ignorance of the secrets of the place.

"Now then, I'm chief of Captain Cutsleeve's henchmen, I reckon I'll run this gang awhile. And first to find Ellen."

He laughed to himself at the idea.

A great deal of trouble and time had been spent, first in the effort to slay, and then in the attempt to secure him; and now he rather fancied he would beat Captain Cutsleeve at all points.

His ears had not altogether been idle since he had been a prisoner in this mountain retreat. He had heard footsteps passing and repassing, and had caught fragments of conversation. To seek for Ellen he first went higher.

When he came to the bend of the canyon, and looked along the hitherto concealed part of the pathway, at no great distance lounged a couple of magnified counterparts of himself. There they watched alike the prisoner behind the triply locked door, and the narrow roadway that tended downward on either hand.

This was, so to speak, the back door of the retreat, and the most convenient way to Glory Gulch. From what he had heard, however, the little sport conceived the idea that there must be an entrance to the hidden valley, somewhere in the direction of Walnut Bar or Peters Flat.

But Touch-Me-Not had something else to think about now. To show any hesitation might invite suspicion. Though he had no doubt in his mind that he could readily dispose of these two men by using the pistols that he had taken from Lieutenant Lew, it was almost certain that the reports would be heard, and might bring foes that, being forewarned, would be more numerous than he could handle.

So he swaggered up to the two men, thoughtfully gling the keys that he had more than once seen the dead outlaw carry in his hand.

"Pears ter me," said one of the guards, with a coarse attempt at jocularity, "yer mout leave them keys with us a while. Shemah heifers ain't so plenty in camp an' some ov us 'ud like ter go a-sparkin' too. This hyar one ar' spy lookin' an' hez lots er callers."

"You, Sam Peters! Yer couldn't tell her face frum a hole in ther wall. Better git yer eyes open what ther leetle sport plastered shut. An' ef yer wants ter boss this thing I reckon I'd better begin ter argy the case now."

Touch-Me-Not risked everything as he spoke, but he was sure that he recognized one of the Peters boys, and for himself, his imitation of the voice and manner of the man he was personating was perfect. As he spoke his hand dropped fiercely to his revolver.

"Hole on, luftenant, fur glory's sake, hole on. I war jest a-jokin', an' I ain't got another word ter say. Don't pull! Yer ther only boss hyar."

"Then keep yer blasted rat-trap shet, er there'll be a winder in yer shirt-bosom. Go on along down ther trail an' look fur ther doctor. Ef yer see him, tell him ther job's done."

The man gave a sort of military salute and walked away, as though glad to escape so cheaply. Lieutenant Lew was generally ready for a joke, but if the joke did not please him there was danger in the air.

The other guard looked on in silent unconcern. He obeyed his orders, and cared nothing beyond. He did not even look up when he heard Touch-Me-Not enter the cage for what seemed another interview with the guarded prisoner.

She turned around quickly, and did not detect the change. Her face was brighter than it had been, and she looked upon this, to her, rather silent outlaw with less disgust than she had done. Was he not to be the tool through which she was to make her escape?

He spoke to her in the coarse, rude dialect of Lieutenant Lew—and still she did not see the difference.

"I reckon this hyer is a dog-gone low-down game they've sot up ag'in' yer; an' I calkerlate it's 'bout time ter show yer me hand. I'd allow yer wouldn't mind ter waltz outen this?"

"Thanks. You are kinder than you looked. Yes, I would give much to be safely away from this; but not all. I cannot pay the price your friend, the doctor, asks. I cannot, will not, marry him, even if that decision costs my father his life and me my own!"

Touch-Me-Not executed a low whistle. He was afraid to give vent to his amazement in words.

"No, I dare not. And yet why should you hesitate to befriend me as you would have done had my answer been different? There is money to be had, there is the deepest gratitude to be earned."

"Yes, I know all that; but there's some things a man don't do fur money—an' gratitude ain't worth shucks when ther subject ov it are

dead. You wouldn't ax me ter break my oath, go back on my pals, and sashay out ter sartin death fur a woman I never seen afore, an' ain't very likely ter see ag'in? I should just guess yer best holt are ter squar' things with ther doctor. He's bin hyar lately."

"You know what he said well enough, and now that you know my answer you will abandon me. Very well. Go your way. I can meet a man's fate like a man, girl though I am."

"That's ther grit I like ter see, an' I war just a-tryin' ov yer. Ther fact ar', I've cometer git yer free. Chirk up, an' be ready fur a move. It's rather a pity, though; I'll hev ter kill ther feller outside, an' mebbe yer won't like that?"

"I do not—I do not! You are strong—cannot you strike him down? Surely you would not kill him, except as a last resort?"

"What's his worthless life to your liberty? He must die."

"His life's wuth a good deal!" shouted a hoarse voice at the door. "Say, stranger, who be you? Don't yer move, neither, fur I have yer kivered."

The guard had managed to overhear the conversation, and was there to talk for himself.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BILLY BENDER WAKES UP.

THE knife-thrust at Mr Gouger did not make a hole as broad as a church, or as deep as a well, but it made an orifice large enough to be decidedly uncomfortable, and kept him pinned up for a few days, just when he most wanted to be out and around.

He raved over the disappearance of his "leetle pard," in a manner that made even the hardened sinners of Glory Gulch look around for a back seat, though some were so uncharitable as to suggest that this was all bosh, and that Gouger himself had a hand in Touch-Me-Not's taking off, or he would never have refused to allow Dr. Coffin to be called in to look at his wound.

One man, however, looked upon him with apparent admiration—Old Billy Bender. The bumper from Black Dam had been out of the way when the riot was progressing, but turned up the following morning, and took right hold at nursing with an air of proprietorship that tickled Gouger's fancy.

The two held a sort of consultation over the case, and then went to work, with wet cloths and a largely reduced allowance of benzine, and the Death-Shot of Shasta did as well as could be expected.

The second afternoon, while Gouger was sleeping serenely, and Howlin' Billy was keeping watch, there appeared a gentleman of hang-dog appearance but brawny muscles, and a belt full of arms. It was the redoubtable Huckleberry.

"Ar' yer hurt bad, pard?" he asked, as Gouger, hearing his tread, opened his eyes and looked up.

"It tickled the side of ther lung a leetle, by ther way she feels; but Tom Gouger ain't a goin' ter turn his toes up ter ther daisies yit er-while. I'll be ready for ye in a few days. I s'pose you'll hang on ag'in ez usual?"

"You bet!"

Huckleberry brought out his favorite monosyllables with extraordinary emphasis. If there was any good thing in this man it was his devotion to his partner.

"Oh, I wasn't a-doubtin' ov yer. Now, how's things goin' at ther Slap Jack? Is it much ov a find?"

"It's rocks—jest heaps on 'em."

"An' what kind ov a crowd ar' it a-runnin' ov it?"

Huckleberry expectorated copiously before he answered, giving a suspicious glance at Billy Bender and another at the window.

"Ther's three er four crowds, each one a-workin' on ther own level, and when they begin knockin' out ther shells I wouldn't wonder ef ther war an awful smash."

"Give us ther pints, Huckleberry. This hyar ole man ar' solid, an' I got an eenterest thar."

"Ther's a ding-blasted game o' some kind. Fust, thar's this woman ez runs things. She's a screamer; but that cuss, ther doctor, ar' stackin' up a cold deck ter wring in on her. He ain't on ther square, nohow."

"Sho! Yer don't say so? What's his game?"

"He are gittin' ready 'ter jump ther claim hisself. Ther's shooters thar, ther' is. They kin sling er bowie a durn sight better ner they kin a pick. When ther time kims they'll all be on hand—an' they count on me bein' thar too. But that ain't ther hull depth ov his game. Thar's three fellers from 'Frisco, er tharabouts, ez are lyin' 'round waitin' ter corral thet wooman. They'd 'a' hed her foul ef they hedn't bin struck with a little bit ov greased lightnin'."

Gouger nodded.

"That's our leetle side pard, ther small, young sport as travels on his muscle."

"Yaas. An' since then ther doctor hez bin a-holdin' ov 'em off, an' I reckon a-droppin' sum rocks in ther pockets. He sent me 'round ter tip 'em ther wink—that's what I made outen his caper—an' ef they don't hear different things, ter go fur her sharp."

"An' then what?"

"I dunno' prezactly. But thar's a man coraled down in ther Slap Jack ez won't live long."

"An' ther fust letter ov his name are Hart Blaine?"

"You bet! Oh, I tell yer Went. Case are a boss. It ain't ther fust time I run ag'in' him. He allers holds his hands full ov trumps, no matter what g me he sots up to."

"Say that name ag'in."

The interruption came from Howlin' Billy, who had been taking in the conversation of the two without giving any sign.

"See hyar, ole man, yer bin a-listenin', when yer orter hed yer ears in yer pocket. They're too ding-blasted long. Huckleberry, han' me yer knife. They kin lose about a foot 'thout any material change, an' this antelope are goin' ter amperate 'em."

"That name—war it Wentworth Case? Did he sprout around Sacrymento about 'fifty-five?"

"That's ther wild gerzelle. I war thar too, an' I see'd a heap. But who in thunder be you?"

Huckleberry was more liberal than his pard. He vouchsafed at least this much information, though he closed with something very like a threat.

Billy Bender ignored the question.

"Yer reelly sure?" he said, as he gave a twitch to the belt at which hung a single huge revolver.

"Ther name slipped out kinder nat'ral-like, ez though yer did know ther man. I thought it war him meself—fur I war thar in 'fifty five, now yer jest bet—but I warn't sure. Copper-heads an' coal-ile, no. But ye'r' an' honest man, an' wouldn't go fur ter fool a poor ole cripple like me. No. An' so I'll take yer word fur it, an' there'll be the doggondest time outen jail. Ef yer don't b'lieve it, watch ther perfesser."

"What yer goin' ter do about it?"

"Never you mind. Good mornin'. I'm goin' out ter take ther Slap Jack."

Without waiting for further question or explanation Billy Bender stalked out, leaving the two pards together.

"Don't call him, Tom," interposed Huckleberry, as Gouger began to mention various pious things—not being in condition to do anything else.

"I'm a kinder ov a slouch, but I knows a thing er two. It's all right. It's ther man what struck ther Bender pocket. I'll bet a hoss he tips ther wink to ther wooman—an' ef he does I ain't a-carin'. She's too good grit ter hev 'em all a-goin' back on her 'thout warnin'. But ef you can't be 'round ter see ther sport I must be goin'."

"Yer torkin' too much, pard; but I guess yer got ther sand ter hold yer own end level. Shoot er leetle one fur me; an' kim 'round ter gimme ther points when ther fun's all over."

"You bet," said Huckleberry, and then he vanished.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DR. COFFIN'S LITTLE GAME.

The mistress of the Slap Jack felt tolerably at ease in her position as manager of the mine.

She had only had hold of the ropes for a few days, and she was really under the doctor's guidance in all matters that pertained to the working of the claim; but as she gave the orders, and the men whom Coffin had provided were promptly obedient it seemed to her that everything was going on as well as could be expected.

She had her own private troubles, but even out of those she seemed in a fair way to escape. The doctor had stated that he had had an interview with one of the men who had attempted her abduction, convinced him of his mistake, and sent him away with his mouth most effectually plastered shut with a bribe sufficiently large to cover the orifice.

There was one other trouble—and though Dr. Coffin assured her that that would come to a satisfactory ending, she could not help but have her doubts.

As Huckleberry had informed his pard, Hartford Blaine was with her in the little shanty at the mine.

His skill with the pistol had done him but little good since the blundering luck of Colonel Canley had sent a bullet so near to the life center, that existence had hung by but a slender thread. The chances indeed, did not seem so favorable now as they did at the time he was first placed in her hands. There was a strange, low fever upon him, and much of the time he was in a stupor or a delirium.

Yet the doctor avowed that he would recover—and the doctor had skill.

On the afternoon of the call of Huckleberry upon his pard the doctor slipped hastily into his office.

He had resumed his Glory Gulch manner, and would hardly have been recognized as the rather handsome man who had been a short time before, so eloquently pleading his case with the younger Ellen Canley.

He threw himself into a chair, and looked around with a contented air.

"She will consent; in fact, she *must* consent. She is a magnificent girl, with courage for two,

but she understands the situation. And then, she feels grateful to me for having saved her father's life. Ha! ha! That will move her more than anything else; but if I can get a start on her affections, she must be Satan's own daughter if I can't win her, soul and body.

"As for the older Ellen, I'd not have bothered with her if I had known of the younger.

"Still, she has served a very good purpose. Over her shoulders I already have possession of the Slap Jack; and that little property, when I realize on it in my wife's name, will bring in a million or two. Then good-by to Glory Gulch, Walnut Bar, and this infernally sultry climate. I suppose it will be Ellen's luck to fall a victim to malaria or heart disease, or some of these new-fangled diseases that eat the soul out without apparent rhyme or reason; but I can find consolation.

"Blaine is dying, Canley will die to-night, and if the good seed I let fall in Lieutenant Lew's mind don't fail of sprouting, Johnny Ling—or Johnny Ling's ghost—will go over the range about the same time. It's a pity to keep Mrs. Canley out of the procession; but I guess to save suspicion, I'd better call in my three stipendiaries, and send her back to 'Frisco. I reckon that's a game that the colonel set up, and I'd be a fool if I didn't take advantage of it. Ellen, the time is at hand, and you will have to go.

"It was a good stroke getting hold of this Huckleberry before he had time to spy around. I remember his gimlet eyes—and what is worse, he remembers me. The boys will take care of him now, and he won't be missed. Ministers of grace defend us! What cords of stiff will be lying around Glory Gulch!

"That's what they were born for, though. You can't rub out what's written, and if you could, it would make no difference. I'll send 'round to Dodger Si's for my three minions of the law, and then have Ellen join us. Quite a friendly little tea-party we'll have here, and when my guests leave, they'll all go off together."

Having thus decided upon matters the doctor went to the door, and, shading his eyes with his hand in a peculiar manner, looked up the street. In a few moments Honest Hank came slouching along. He was near at hand, and had seen the signal.

To him the doctor gave his directions, and the messenger departed with alacrity.

"If she don't come, I suppose they might go and bring her, but that would be risky, though the boys have their orders. People might think there was some rotten attempt to jump the claim. If she does come they'll bounce her on the road, and hustle her off before she has a chance to whimper. It won't take long to tell which it is to be. When people start for a talk with their attorney they generally go a-flying. I can see the fun from the back door. She won't know what's up until she steps around the bend, and then there won't be time for a scream.

Through a little rift in the land the doctor, after a little, watched curiously the roadway that led out to the Slap Jack. This thing was not going to be done under a bushel, and there was plenty of chance for a lively time. There were shanties on each side of the point indicated, and at no great distance. There were plenty of cabins between Glory Gulch and Colonel Canley's find.

Before long he saw the three men at their posts. In broad daylight it did not look like an ambushade, but it was, all the same.

Then the doctor gave a start.

Ellen Canley, the elder, came around the bend, and the three men stepped forward. The trap was being sprung.

And then, just as the foremost placed his hand on the woman's arm, he dropped to the ground from a heavy blow, and Huckleberry faced the remaining two with drawn revolvers.

The woman had brought a body-guard, and by rare good chance, the only man that she could trust. As she was coming away from the mine she met Tom Gouger's pard, and, with stolid indifference to the rights and wrongs of the case, he now stood behind her.

And while he covered the two men with his weapons she darted past, and fled fleetly toward Dr. Coffin's.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MANACLED AT LAST.

"CURSES on the wretch! he'll spoil it all! What did the boys mean when they let him get away? They'll carry out some corpses and bring in some better men at the Slap Jack! She's coming straight for here. Perdition seize her, why can't she stay and fight it out? She was ready enough with tools when she was fighting me. It's not too late yet. She stumbles. Maybe I can bring him down."

The doctor rushed back into his office and seized a carbine. His eyes were blazing with the fire of murder, and he caught the weapon as though he meant to use it.

He was back in an instant, as it seemed to him; yet he was back too late. Huckleberry and the three deputy constables had passed from his plane of vision, while he heard a mur-

mur of voices around The Blizzard that told him the woman had been seen.

In fact Ellen Canley's footsteps were already almost at the door, while Huckleberry, when the three men had promptly thrown up their hands and explained the state of affairs, coolly dropped his revolvers back in their holsters with the remark:

"Ef yer hev ther law on your side, an' kin take her outen ther Doc's lay-out, this hoss ar' willin'. I reckon I'll g'long down an' see ther fun."

Panting and breathless the woman burst in at one door, just as the doctor, carbine in hand, entered by the other.

"Yew saw my messenger, did yew? He made quick time. I wanted tew see yew, fur I hev just he'ed that Jim Canley is not only in the land of the livin'; but air likely soon tew be back."

"Curse you and Co'onel Canley, and this whole scheme! What do I care for your mines and your millions? Hartford Blaine is dying. If you can save him, come to him; but by the everlasting, I believe you have poisoned him. If you have, I'll eat your felon heart out. Pitch me no more of that draw!—do you think I don't know you, Wentworth Case? Are you for me or against me? You told me the truth once or twice in the old time—dare you tell it to me now?"

"What dew you mean?"

"I mean that you are standing in with these ruffians, and that you are playing a cross game somehow. Was it not enough that we three were to share the spoil? How do you expect to hold on to the mine without me? You know this is a vile plot; and if it succeeds, it breaks you up."

"Ef yew air Canley's wife, yew air ther woman they want. Yew can't git 'round that. His wife warn't divorced, but she seems tew hev married sev'ral other men. In fact she war slightly irregular. It ar'n't any wonder I want ter pull out."

She drew herself up to her full bight, and looked at him with a stare of scorn.

"You didn't use to be a coward in the old days, Wentworth Case, I doubt if you are one now. Take your own course: but, tell me, first, if you can save Hartford Blaine."

"I dunno what yew mean by callin' me by thet name. It air none ov mine, an' I hev hed a good many. Ez fur Hartford Blaine, I'll allow thet ther brother bizz'ness air about played. Yew wouldn't take no sich tr'uble 'bout any brother. You'd let him flicker. An' Ellen Canley's brother's dead. I reckon he died about ther same time ez she did."

"Wretch! What is it to you whether he is my brother or not? Can you save him?"

"Tew speak squarly, I kin not. Men ner angils c'd'd do thet now. I've done my sheer in this lay-out, an' it's a fizzle. I reckon I'll draw a moist pen slick through, and start fresh 'on ther square. Heur's ther depity constables from 'Frisco an' half ov Glory Gulch at the front door; I don't see ther's much else I kin dew."

"We can fight if they won't listen to reason. Come. We can fly by the back door, and with the men at the mine we can defy them all. Only save Hart Blaine."

"It air tew late."

The crisis had come in a different shape from what he had expected; but the doctor was contented to let it take its course. Indeed, there was nothing better for him to do.

"It is not too late for one thing—revenge! You would consign me to a living death; I prefer the real article. When I leave this room alive you remain behind, a corpse. One bullet, at least, is for you."

As she spoke, the woman sprung for the corner of the room, where she stood at bay, with drawn weapons, while into the room streamed the three deputies, with Huckleberry and a score of Gulchers at their backs.

"Fellow-citizens," began the doctor, taking time by the forelock, "this woman air squar' enuf Jim Canley's widder; but et seems she air crazy ez er loon, an' hez made her escape from an asylum. I hate ter buck ag'in' ther law, an' I don't keer ter go back on er female. I hev perposed that she go back an' git this matter straightened out, ef money an' law kin dew it. Unless ther's some one kims with a better right, ther Gulch 'll look after her stake here, an' see ez I runs it in her interest. They know me here, an' that I'm a good man tew tie tew; but she hez one ov her wild fits on, an' air actooly dangerous. Kin I offer squarer?"

"That's so, Doc! It's the best you kin do," answered Johnny Goodman, as spokesman for the crowd. "That is, ef she's the woman. We've had a little inkling of this matter, an' it 'pears ter me ther war another man er two mentioned. Ef that's so ther's some on us askin', whar in blazes does Jim Canley's widder kin in at?"

"It's false!" cried the woman. "I had a sister Margaret. They have confounded me with her. That villain knows better. We were twins; but he knows the difference. Men of Glory Gulch, he is a treacherous scoundrel, who has stolen even the name he bears. There

was a Sylvanus Coffin, and that wretch stripped him of all he had, and perhaps of life itself. If he had not first slain him he would not now dare to bear this name, instead of his true one of Wentworth Case. Let him deny it if he dares!"

The doctor's face showed a contemptuous smile as he once more turned to the crowd.

"I've nussed tew many men here back ag'in tew life fur them tew b'lieve I'm a fraud. That that woman is Ellen Canley I firmly b'lieve. That she's ravin' mad jist neow I know, an' fur ther rest I dunno a thing. But fur ther good ov ther pore woman, I say she'd better go back."

"Went. Case, or Captain Cutsleeve as you be, you ar' a liar! Let 'em tetch that woman ef they dar'!"

As the three men made a combined movement toward the woman a new champion had stepped between her and them, and a shout of derision went up as the men of the Gulch recognized Billy Bender!

"And who air yew?"

"I'm the simon pure Doctor Sylvanus Coffin! Every word that that woman says is a gospel truth. This devil stole my money, my wife and my name. By the gods, I'm hyar fur vengeance!"

And Billy Bender, with an old-fashioned howl, swung out his huge navy revolver.

There were half a dozen of the doctor's own particular men in the crowd, roughs and fighting men who jumped as he winked. They began to close up on the old man.

"It's that lying old bummer, Billy Bender. Hustle him out!"

"He's got the jim-jams, an'll make a kill ov it ef some one don't snuff him off."

"This is business hyar; we ain't no time fur folly."

With such exclamations half a dozen men made a dash at Billy, just as he drew up his weapon at Doctor Coffin, and pulled the trigger.

There was a stunning report, a room full of drifting smoke, under cover of which there was a sudden rush of feet and a woman's cry.

At the appearance of Billy Bender, and at the sound of his voice, Ellen Canley stood like a woman turned to stone, the muzzles of her pistols drooping downward, and her eyes staring at the bummer as though he was a phantom from the grave. No wonder that she forgot her threat, or that her weapons were twisted from her unresisting hands.

As the smoke rolled away the hard, taunting laugh of the doctor was heard.

"A mad woman, an' a drunken ijeot! Quite a carryvan! Git eout ther hull ov yer afore ther air murder done."

"It's all right, doctor; we don't go back on you; but it 'pears ter me we smell somethin' rotten somewhar."

"And here it is!"

Through the doorway, with the spring of a cat, came a little man, with a red shirt, a broad sombrero, and a mask on his face, who buried himself upon the doctor before that worthy had even noticed his advent. There was the sharp click of steel, and before them all the doctor stood manacled.

"I'm a United States Marshal, and I arrest you, Wentworth Case, alias Captain Cutsleeve, for the murder of Courtly Hammond and for a hundred other crimes. I've got you dead to rights, and the first man that draws in your defense drops. No more muscle now; I'm on the shoot."

The mask dropped away from the face of the speaker, and with one hand he clutched the doctor's shoulder, while the other handled a cocked revolver. Johnny Goodman and others gave a shout as they recognized Touch-Me-Not, the little sport, back once more, and very much alive.

As he ceased speaking there was a great crash in the further end of the room, and the woman known as Colonel Canley's wife dropped to the floor with the blood oozing from a wound in her breast.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A TRANSFORMATION SCENE.

THE guard who thought he had Touch-Me-Not lined made a very great mistake. The weasel had not even closed his eyes. Straight backward the little sport flung himself, at the risk of bones, and as he fell his revolver flew up, and a bullet went crashing through the outlaw's brain.

Then Touch-Me-Not sprung to his feet.

"We're in a heap of danger, but if that shot don't draw a crowd we can make the rifle. We must be making lively tracks out of this, anyhow."

"But not without my father. If you save one you must take both."

And so it happened that Touch-Me-Not, in a few words being put in possession of the facts of the case, as Ellen understood them, and having explained his identity to her, succeeded not only in rescuing the young girl, but in bearing her father away—a proceeding that taxed heavily the wonderful strength that lay in his small frame.

Once only was he at fault on the downward path. Somewhere below he knew he would

meet the guard whom he had, as Lieutenant Lew, sent in that direction. Hampered as he was it was a question who would catch the drop if they met without warning. Yet Touch-Me-Not held it for a moment; and then went on.

In the canyon below he concealed Ellen and her father and then hurried on to Glory Gulch, arriving there just in time to take part in the scene at the doctor's office.

For a moment the more honest portion of his hearers were stupefied at his announcement, which was more startling, even, than the fall of the woman.

"Oh, I mean it! This man, years ago, was a gambling speculator who finally murdered his partner, who went by the name of Ling; but whose right name was Courtly Hammond. He was my father, and a good deal such a little man as I am, only older. It was a big mistake for father had twenty thousand dollars of the firm's money put away somewhere, and to this day Captain Case never got his share of it though he did offer me my life if I would tell in what bank it was. Not much! It can lie there and rot, first. I've been after him some time; but I don't believe I'd ever dropped to him if he hadn't stolen another old side-pardner's name. There's the real Sylvanus Coffin, and this scoundrel ran away with his wife. You can see what a wreck it made of him. As for this little game about the Slap Jack—it's played! The genuine Jim Canley will be around in a day or so, to run his own affairs; and, meantime, if there's any kickers they can settle with a company of Uncle Sam's blue-coats that are on the road over from Rat Trap. Doctor Coffin, alias Leetle Billy, alias Captain Cutsleeve, will go out of the west at the end of a rope. Jim Canley and you three fellows from Frisco, that he sent for, are fooled. This is Billy Bender's wife, and the wrong woman. Her sister died in Phenix, a year ago, as I happen to know. As for the rest of the yarn—you'll hear it when the time comes. Meantime, if Johnny Goodman will pick out a guard of real solid men, of sense and sand. I'll corral my capture, and go on to finish up the rest of my game, Huckleberry, you stand by me."

"You bet," responded the chorus.

Touch-Me-Not—or Courtly Hammond—was compelled to give some sort of explanation; now he looked over toward Howlin' Billy.

He was by the woman who had once been his wife.

"It broke me all up," the bummer was saying, "but it wa'n't your fault, was it, now? It was his dev'lish slick tongue that fooled us both. I wa'n't of much account, but yer wouldn't hev left me, would yer? I never know'd him before to-day; but I couldn't hit him 'bout takin' a slap at you. An' I didn't give you away, did I? Copperheads an' coal ile, I b'lieve she's dyin'."

The man from Black Dam was a wreck before; but the events of the last hour had crushed him all apart. Yet he still clung to the woman that once had been his, and she, wolf that she was, died in his arms, without an answering word.

The work that the little man had set out to do was well accomplished, and just in time.

Captain Cutsleeve, or whatever he had best be called, saw himself suddenly beaten at every point, and closed his mouth as tightly as the dead woman had done. Perhaps if he had had her chance he, too, would have taken his own life, though he did not altogether despair. The rope was not actually around his neck. As this detective avenger was a Government officer, there was to be a regular trial, and meantime something might happen.

James Canley and his daughter were found and brought safely in; and with Hammond at the fore, it did not take long to dissipate every shadow of the plot that Sylvanus Coffin and his associates had laid.

When Touch-Me-Not, attended by a strong posse, went out to the Slap Jack to demand possession in the name of the rightful owner, they found it evacuated; but cold and stiff in the shanty lay the body of Hartford Blaine, whether dead from the wound given him by Colonel Canley, or from poison, no one ever knew. He had unwittingly brought these old-time partners, and then died.

The intricacies of their retreat having been discovered, the soldiers had no difficulty in effectually dispersing the Cutsleeve gang. Some were killed, some captured, and the rest fled away in search of safer browsing ground.

Tom Gouger—though his heart was so deeply centered in Huckleberry—appeared rejoiced to see the little sport who had so successfully held him to his work, though perhaps he was not so much flattered when Touch-Me-Not, with a cordial shake of the hand, remarked:

"Oh, you've turned out a pretty square sort of a tough, especially when you know there's a bigger hand out than you can raise. But, do you know, I thought, for a spell, that you and Huckleberry belonged to the infernal Cutsleeves; and I just flashed my diamond in your eyes to see if I could draw you on."

"Thankee, pard! We're howlin' tornaders when we strike ther war-path; but we ain't them kind eggzactly, be we Huckleberry!"

"You bet not!"

And the refrain uttered, the man with the luscious appellation eyed the little sport with the deepest admiration. One so lively on the muscle and shoot was more interesting to him than a crowned king.

And Colonel Canley's daughter?

The reader has used his eyes to little advantage if he has not already seen which way her heart was tending. Courtly Hammond could woo as well as win; and when the Cutsleeve matter was settled, and Wentworth Case had finally gone to his long home, the Slap Jack had a new manager, and Colonel Canley another child.

THE END.

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